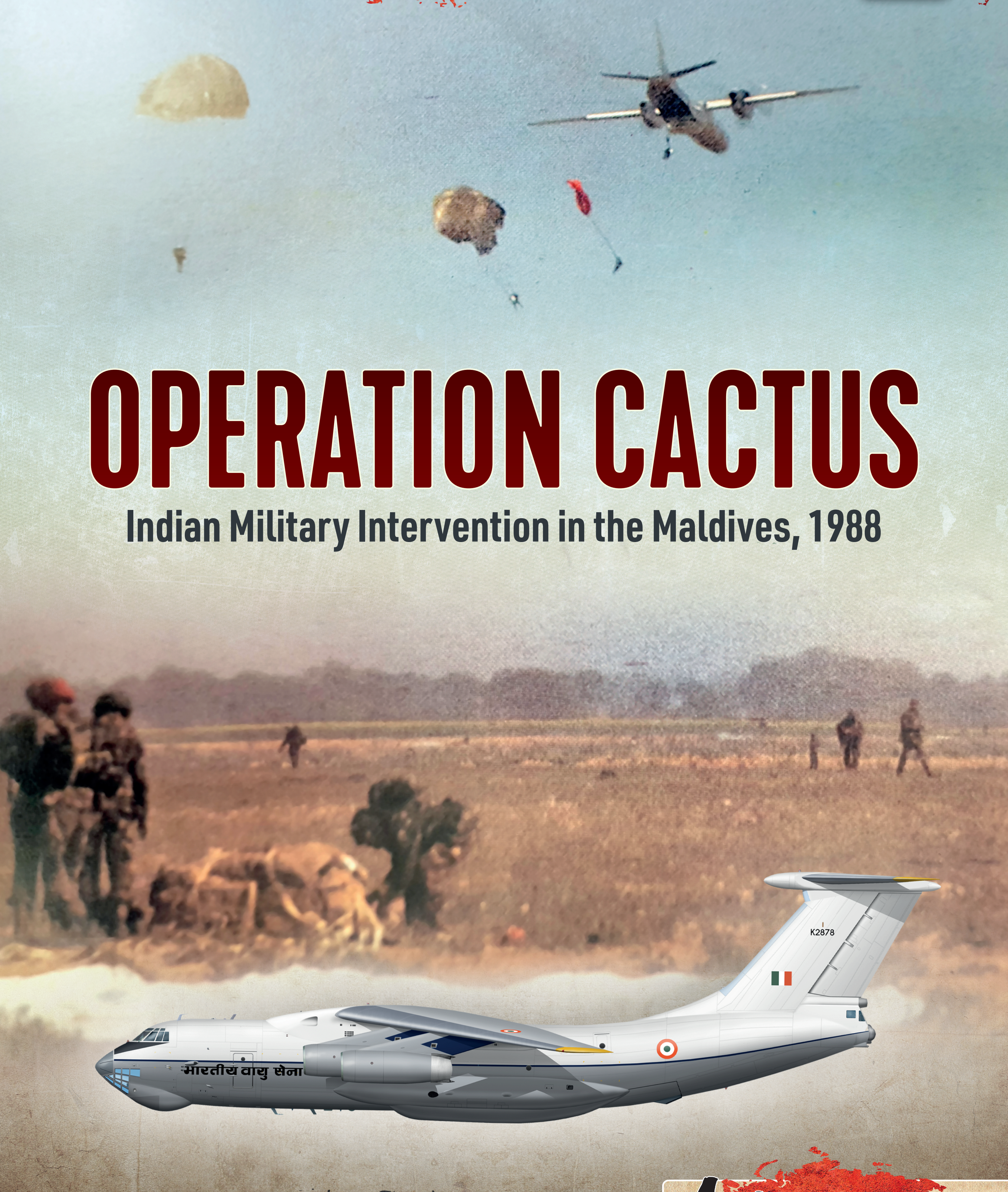
No.26

OPERATION CACTUS

Indian Military Intervention in the Maldives, 1988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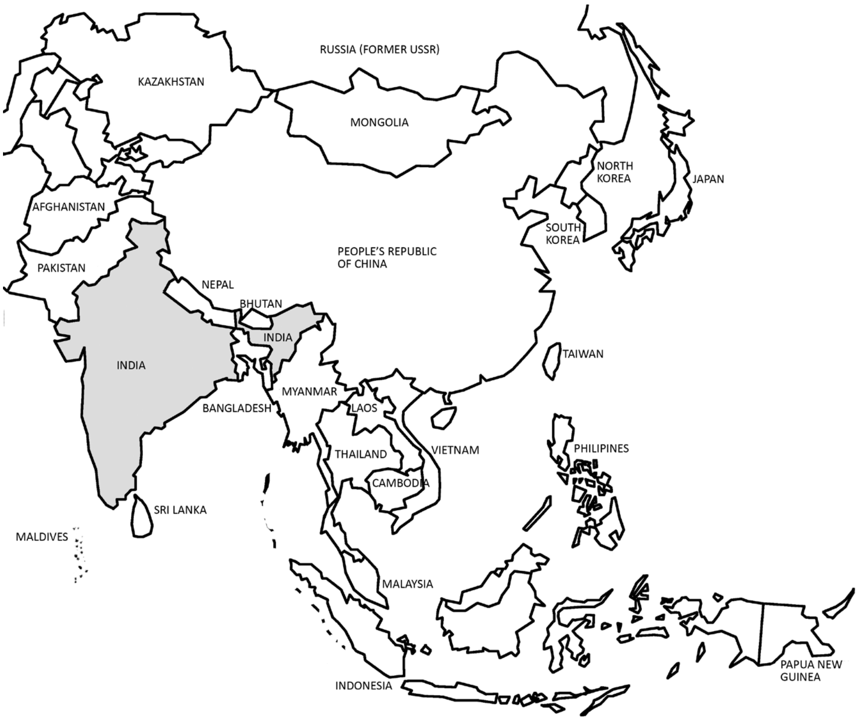
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MALDIVES
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PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of described events.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAC	Army Aviation Corps
APC	Armoured Personnel Carrier
ARDE	Armament Research and Development Establishment
ATGM	Anti-Tank Guided Missile
CO	Commanding Officer
FOC-in-C	Flag Officer Commanding in Chief
IAF	Indian Air Force
ICV	Infantry Combat Vehicle
IFG	Indian Field Gun
IMSF	Indian Marine Special Forces
INS	Indian Naval Ship
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MANPADS	Man Portable Air Defence System
MARCOS	Marine Commandos
MCF	Marine Commando Force
MDP	Maldivian Democratic Party
NSG	National Security Guards
NSS	National Security Service
Para	Paratroop Regiment
Para Cdo	Paratroop Commando
Para SF	Paratroop Regiment (Special Forces)
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLOTE	People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing
SAM	Surface to Air Missile
TELO	Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front

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INTRODUCTION, THE MALDIVES AND SRI LANKA'S TAMIL INSURGENTS

Operation Cactus – A Summary and Its Significance

Operation Cactus was an Indian response to the 1988 Maldives coup d'état. The coup was an attempt by a group of Maldivians led by businessman Abdullah Luthufi which enlisted armed mercenaries of a Tamil secessionist organisation from Sri Lanka – the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). They sought to overthrow the government in the island republic of Maldives and were inspired by the deeply flawed electoral process in the Maldives itself.

The coup d'état failed after the intervention of Indian paratroopers and Special Forces, who not only secured the Maldivian capital, Malé, but also eliminated the terrorist leaders of PLOTE. Upon realising their failure, the surviving members of the terrorist group hijacked a Maldivian freighter named the MV *Progress Light* and attempted to escape, probably back to Sri Lanka. After they fled, Indian ground forces called for naval assistance, and in a coordinated air and sea action, the Indian Navy intercepted and captured the mercenaries, who were brought to justice.

Two earlier attempts at insurrection had been made in the Maldives in 1980 and 1983. These attempted coups d'état against Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's presidency were not deemed to be sufficient by the plotters, but the third attempt in November 1988 was a much more serious affair, causing alarm in the international community.

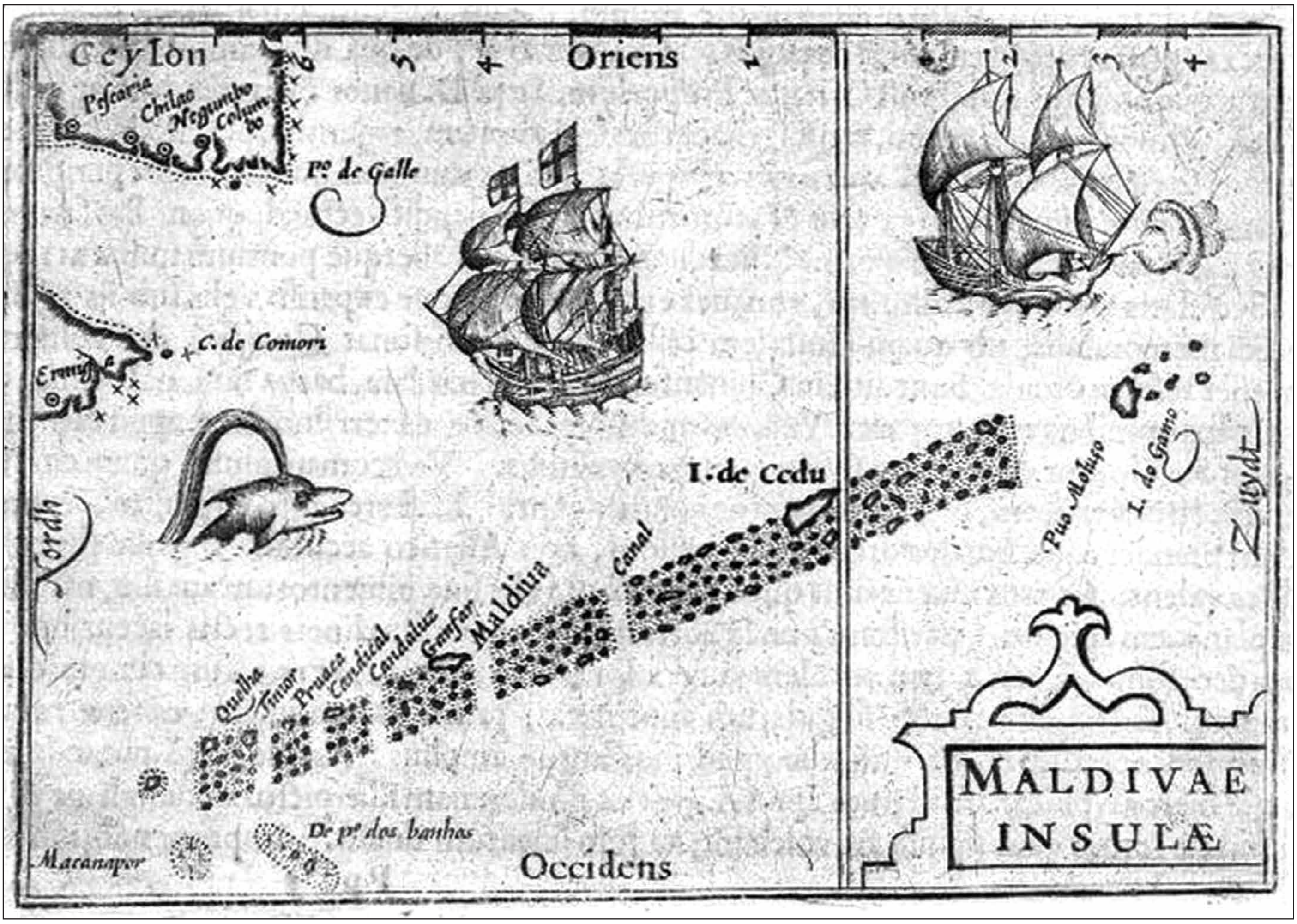
As will be detailed below, the 1988 operation was well planned and involved about 80 armed PLOTE mercenaries who landed in the capital Malé, just before down, using speedboats deployed from a hijacked Sri Lankan freighter. Exploiting the Maldives' reputation as a holiday resort, an equal number of PLOTE operatives, disguised as tourists, had already infiltrated Malé some time earlier. The armed mercenaries were quickly able to gain control of the capital and such important installations as major government buildings, the airport, port and television and radio stations.[1]

However, their attempt to apprehend the president was thwarted when – while the mercenaries were moving towards the presidential palace where President Gayoom was residing with his family – the Maldivian National Security advisor escorted the president to the defence minister's home. The defence minister then escorted the president to a safe house, where they awaited assistance.[2]

Though the mercenaries had seized the presidential palace and managed to take the Maldivian education minister as hostage, President Gayoom was able to request military intervention, initially from Sri Lanka and Pakistan. However, both these states declined, citing a lack of military capability. The president then sought Singapore's intervention, but again Singapore declined, citing its own limitations.[3]

After that, Gayoom contacted the United States, but owing to the distance from their military base at Diego Garcia – some 1,000km – their intervention would take at least two days to reach the Maldives. The president, in desperation, then contacted the United Kingdom, which very pragmatically advised him to seek assistance from India. It was only then that President Gayoom made contact with the Indian government for assistance. As will be shown, India acted upon this request; after an emergency meeting was arranged at the Secretariat Building in New Delhi, India planned and launched its operation within 16 hours of receiving the request for assistance. It was short, sharp and, more importantly, successful.[4]

This operation – carried out at the last moment, with existing resources and conducted at a place many thousands of kilometres away from India – was a watershed for both India and the Maldives. It cemented India's place as a regional security provider and ensured that its close ties to the Maldives acquired an important military dimension, with Indian forces now always being deployed close to



Bertius' map of Maldives, issued in Middelburg, Netherlands, in 1598. (Open source)

the Maldives on routine operations, but with the ability to intervene if needed.

The Maldives

The Republic of Maldives is a small archipelagic state in the Arabian Sea of the Indian Ocean. It lies southwest of Sri Lanka and India, about 700 kilometres (430 miles) from the Indian subcontinent's mainland. The chain consists of 26 atolls and stretches from Ihavandhippolhu Atoll in the north to Addu Atoll – which is near to the equator – in the south.[5]

Its territory spans roughly 298 square kilometres (115 square miles), and while tiny, the Maldives is one of the most geographically dispersed of the world's sovereign states. It is the smallest Asian country by both land area and population, which currently stands at a little over half a million people. Its capital city of Malé is the country's most populated city, and is traditionally called the King's Island, from where the ancient royal dynasties ruled because of its central location.

Geographically and geologically, the Maldives archipelago is located on the Chagos-Laccadive Ridge, a massive submarine mountain range in the Indian Ocean. It also forms what is termed a terrestrial ecoregion, in conjunction with the Chagos archipelago and India's Lakshadweep islands. It is a very low-lying country with no mountain ranges; the country has an average ground-level elevation of 1.5 metres (4ft 11in) above sea level. Its highest natural point is also one of the lowest in the world, at just 5.1 metres (17ft) above sea level.[6]

The main religion of its population, Islam, reached the Maldivian archipelago in the twelfth century. The archipelago was thereafter consolidated as a sultanate, and exploiting its exceptional geographic location, it developed strong commercial and cultural ties with Asia and Africa, as well as with the Arab world.

Of the 1,190 islands in the Maldives archipelago, only 198 are inhabited. Even on these islands, the population is scattered among them, with the greatest concentration on the capital island, Malé. There are severe limitations on drinkable water and arable land, which presents challenges to not only residents of the Maldives but also the sustainability of its tourist economy.

Early History

Legends and history often intersect in respect of the age of the Maldives, which is an old nation, or at least an old entity – dating back some 2,500 years, according to the legends of the Allama Ahmed Shihabuddine (Allama Shihab al-Din) of Meedhoo in Addu Atoll. He claims, in the book *Kitāb fi āthār Mīdhu al-qādimah* (كتاب في آثار ميذو القديمة; *On the Ancient Ruins of Meedhoo*), written in the seventeenth century in Arabic, that the first settlers of the Maldives were people known as Dheyvis. They allegedly came from the Kalibanga in India. This was purportedly before the Maurya Emperor Ashoka's rule from in 269–232 BC.[7]

A strong underlying layer of southern Indian Dravidian population and culture survives in Maldivian society, with some considerable evidence of both Tamil and Malayalam features in the language of the Maldives. This is also evident from any study of place names, kinship terms, poetry, dance and religious beliefs prior to

Islam. South Indian Malabari seafaring culture was instrumental in the settlement of the islands by Malayali seafarers, and the Maldives were no exception.[8]

As was the norm, and as part of the gradual building of the English and French colonial empires, from the mid-sixteenth century onwards the region came under the increasing influence of various European powers. This culminated with the Maldives becoming a British protectorate in 1887.

It is interesting to note that the Maldives has remained an independent nation throughout its recorded history, save for a brief spell of Portuguese occupation in the middle of the sixteenth century. Between 1887 and 1965, the country was a British protectorate while retaining full internal sovereignty. Upon its independence in 1965, the Maldives joined the United Nations on 20 September of that year.

A presidential republic was established in 1968, with an elected People's Majlis. The ensuing decades have seen political instability, efforts at democratic reform and environmental challenges posed by climate change.

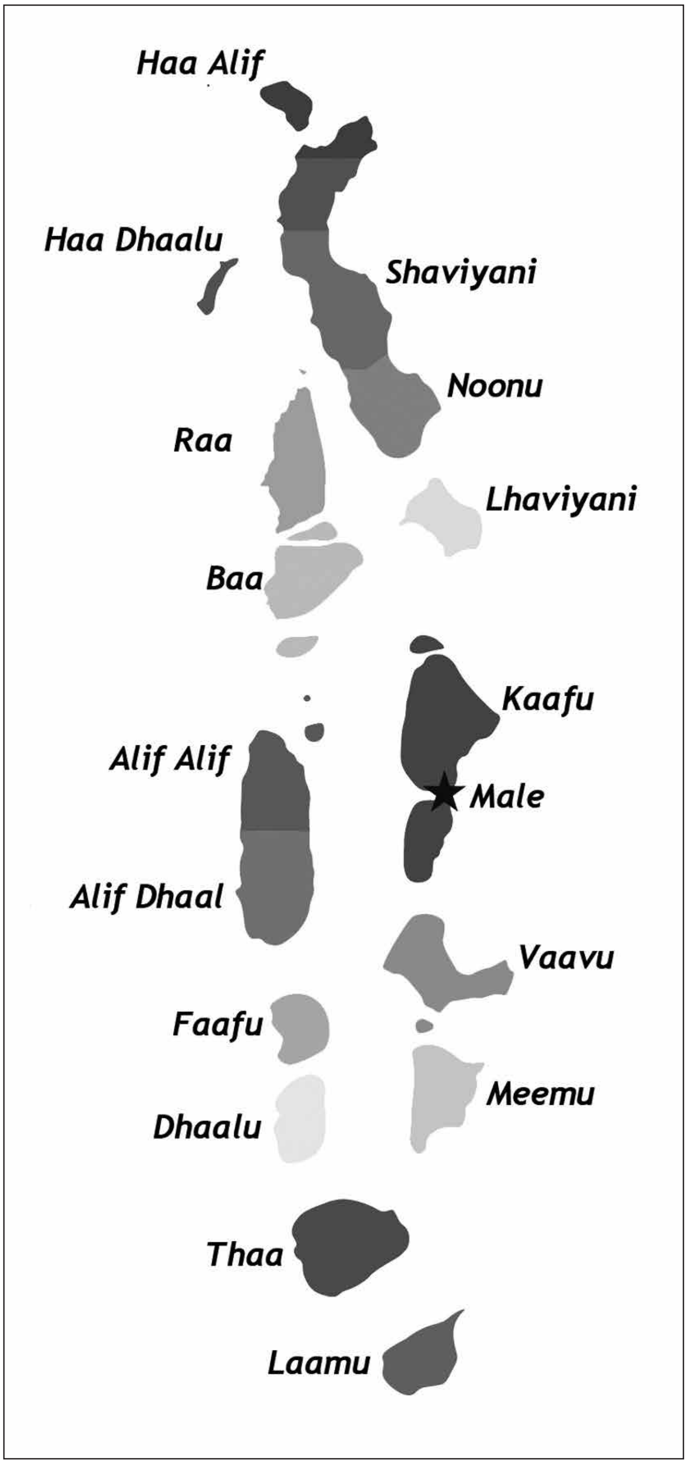
Politics

The political history of the Maldives in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is interesting as a study in its own right. Following the death of Sultan Abdul Majeed Didi on 21 February 1952, the members of the country's parliament, the People's Majlis, chose Mohamed Amin Didi to be the next Sultan, but in an act of political sagacity, he stated that 'for the sake of the people of Maldives I will not accept the crown and the throne'.

Thereafter, the People's Majlis voted on 13 April the same year to form a commission, with Amin Didi as its chairman, to determine the country's future governance structure and to create a new system of both electoral administration and constitutional governance. The commission was highly distinguished and qualified, and included the noted scholar Famuladeyri Kaleygefan, Chief Justice Abdullah Jalaludeen, Majlis Speaker Malim Moosa Mafaiy Kilegefan, Deputy Vazirul-Auzam Ibrahim Mohamed Didi, Kolhumadulu Atoll MP Ibrahim Shihab, Galolhu MP Bucha Hassan Kaleygefan and Faadhippolhu Atoll chief Kaannaa Kaleygefan.

On 16 April 1952, after the short operation of the group, the People's Majlis affirmed the commission's decision to form a republic and to hold a referendum on a new constitution for the islands. The results of this referendum led to the Maldives becoming a republic, with Amin Didi as the first elected president, having abolished the 812-year-old sultanate. Though as a president he is remembered as a reformer of the education system and a promoter of women's rights, while he was in Ceylon to undergo medical treatment, a revolt led by his deputy, Velaanaagey Ibrahim Didi, was successfully conducted. When President Amin Didi returned, he was confined to Dhoonidhoo Island. Although he escaped to Malé and tried to take control of the city of Bandeyrige, he was beaten by an angry mob and died soon after.

After the fall of Amin Didi's presidency, a referendum was held and 98 percent of the people voted in favour of a restoration of the monarchy, so the country was once again declared a sultanate. A new People's Majlis was elected, after its dissolution following the revolt. Its members decided to take a secret vote to elect a sultan, leading to Prince Mohammed Fareed Didi being elected as the 84th Sultan of the Maldives in 1954. The new sultan's first prime minister was Ehgamugey Ibrahim Ali Didi (later Ibrahim Faamuladheyri Kilegefaan). However, on 11 December 1957, the prime minister was forced to resign and Velaanagey Ibrahim Nasir was elected to replace him the following day.



The islands of the Maldives. (Map by Tom Cooper)

It should be noted that the United Kingdom maintained a large military presence in the Maldives until 1976. In 1956, the UK sought and obtained permission to re-establish its wartime RAF Gan airfield in the southernmost Addu Atoll, which enabled the employment of hundreds of locals. The Maldives granted the British a 100-year lease on the base at Gan that required them to pay £2,000 a year, plus a 100-year lease for some 440,000 square metres on Hitaddu for radio installations. These bases served as a staging post for British military flights to the Far East and Australia, replacing RAF Mauripur in Pakistan, which had been vacated earlier that year.[9]

In 1957, the islands' relationship with Britain began to change. The new prime minister, Ibrahim Nasir, called for a review of the agreement with a view to shortening the lease and increasing the annual payment. Subsequently, there was a challenge in 1959 from

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The withdrawal of the last British troops from the British military airfield staging post at Gan, on 29 March 1976: ever since then, this date is celebrated as the independence day of the Maldives. (Foreign Service Institute of Maldives)

a local secessionist movement in the three southernmost atolls that benefited economically from the British presence on Gan.[10]

This led to the formation of an independent state, the United Suvadive Republic, with Abdullah Afif as president, Hithadhoo as its capital and a small population of 20,000 inhabitants scattered over Huvadu, Addu and Fua Mulaku. Pleas for recognition by Britain came to nought as the British, while not unsympathetic to requests for increased payments, were not keen on a secession movement in the Maldives. In the end, the point was moot as the base was closed in 1976 as part of a scaling down of global commitments, with the British withdrawal of permanently stationed forces 'East of Suez', initiated by the Labour government of Harold Wilson, which led to the British military ending their presence in southern Asia.[11]

Following independence in 1965 and the end of the sultanate, a referendum was held to determine the Maldives' constitutional fate. The 1968 referendum approved a constitution making the Maldives a republic, with the attendant executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. This constitution was amended in 1970, 1972, 1975 and 1997 and again in 2008.

As might be expected, Ibrahim Nasir, who was prime minister under the pre-1968 sultanate, became president and held the office from 1968–1978. After his second term, he was succeeded by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who was elected president in 1978 and re-elected in 1983, 1988, 1993, 1998 and 2003. At the end of his presidency in 2008, Gayoom was the longest-serving leader in Asia, but he remains a controversial figure.

Gayoom's rise began as Ibrahim Nasir's second term was coming to an end, and when he decided not to seek re-election in June 1978, the Citizen's Majlis was asked to nominate a presidential candidate as required under the country's then constitution. Despite his refusal to seek re-election, there were 45 votes for Nasir, with only three for Abdul Gayoom. This led to another ballot being called on 16 June, at which Gayoom received 27 votes and allowed himself to be declared the sole candidate.[12]

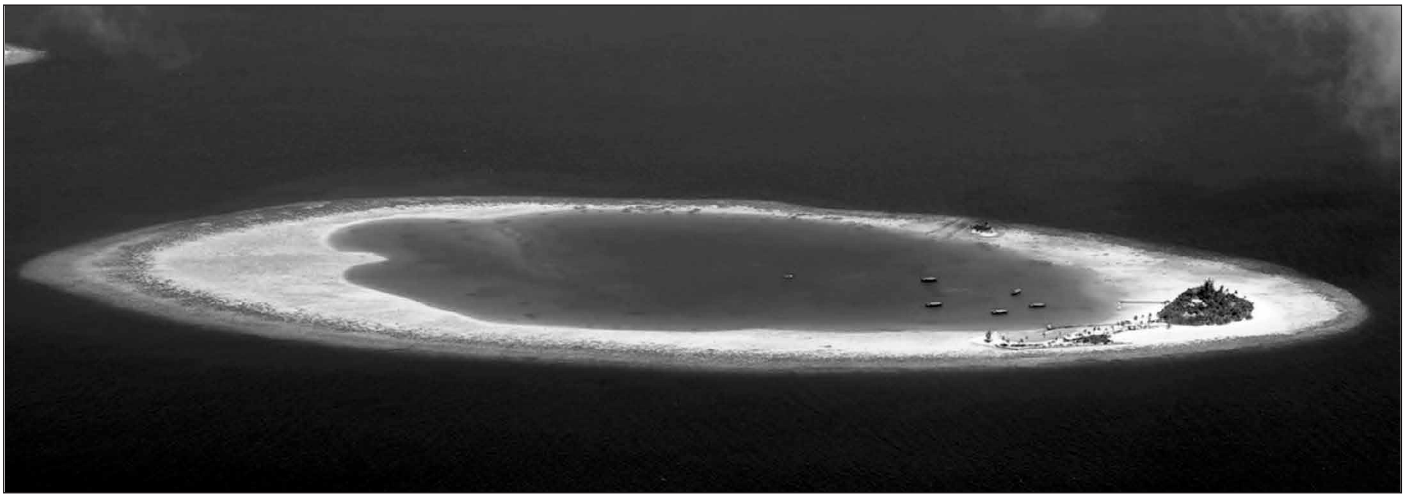
In elections held five months later, Gayoom was elected the new President of the Maldives, with 92.96 percent of the votes cast. Subsequently, in a 1983 referendum, he was re-elected on 30 September for a second term, polling a record 95.6 percent, and thereafter on 23 September 1988, he was re-elected for a third term with an even larger 96.4 percent of the popular vote – just a few months before the coup.

Even after the events of 1988, on 1 October 1993, Gayoom was elected for an astonishing fourth term with 92.76 percent of the popular vote. This was followed on 16 October 1998 by the start of an unprecedented fifth term of office, this time with 90.9 percent of the vote. Gayoom was re-elected for a sixth and final five-year term in October 2003 after receiving 90.28 percent of the vote. In all cases, he was the sole candidate, having been nominated by the Majlis and having in every possible way dissuaded rival candidates. In many ways, he was effectively an elected despot.[13]

In this regard, Gayoom was very much following in the vein of Nasir, widely criticised for being an authoritarian leader and for internal political repression.

As has often been the case throughout recorded history, upon taking office Gayoom promised liberal reforms but spent much of his time and effort in consolidating his personal grip on power. This he did to an extreme extent, carefully skirting the boundaries of becoming an outright tyrant. In one of his first moves, he replaced the leaders of the security forces – which were kept very modest – with loyal supporters.

He also invested his brother, Abdulla Hameed, as chief governor of all the provinces, thereby ensuring administrative compliance. The nepotism continued when he placed a brother-in-law as the head of security and trade, while as control of the media was seen as vital, he put another brother-in-law in charge of the nation's only



One of the thousands of minor atolls in the Maldives archipelago. (Maldives Ministry of Environment and Energy)

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom with Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi. (Indian Government, official release)

media, a radio station. He then gave the latter the task of developing a rudimentary TV station and turning this into an instrument of state propaganda.[14]

This set an unhealthy trend for the next 20 years, as President Gayoom steadily built barriers to shield his powers while aggressively undermining the growing and increasingly assertive Maldivian civil society. This culminated in 1997 when the Special Majlis, a select group of parliamentarians, produced a new constitution which served to significantly enhance Gyoom's executive powers. Not surprisingly, even this had shades of nepotism, as Gayoom's brother, Abdulla Hameed, guided the Special Majlis. This served to effectively entrench Gayoom in office long enough to become one of Asia's longest standing 'elected' dictators, a position which he held until 2008.

For the 30 years of his rule, President Gayoom refused to acknowledge any political parties as having legitimacy. He vacuously stated that the existence of opposition parties wound not be in the best interests of the 'homogeneous nature of Maldivian society'.

Despite these challenges, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) was formed in Britain in 2001 and began organising itself. The MDP, with little political experience, relied on the support of like-minded citizens, or at least those in favour of parliamentary democracy. The MDP would play a key role unifying and organising the various opposition groups into a force able to defeat Gayoom in the 2008 elections.[15]

The Maldives continues to have relatively weak democratic and judicial structures, with subsequent presidents being prone to abusing their offices. The presidency of Abdullah Yameen, who governed between 2013 and 2018, was particularly notorious for his subversion of the judiciary, the incarceration of political opponents and his casual use of states of emergency to further suppress civil liberties in the country.

The inability of the country's parliamentary and judicial arms to stop this blatant abuse of power by an elected official is particularly noteworthy, as it shows that the Maldives are yet to become a strong and sustainable democracy.

Internationally, the Maldives became a founding member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and, as previously noted, it is also a member of the United Nations. In addition, it is a member the Commonwealth of Nations, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Non-Aligned Movement.

The Maldives was a member of the Commonwealth from July 1982 until withdrawing from the organisation in October 2016. This was in response to concerns raised by other Commonwealth members of its increasing internal repression and human rights abuses, plus its subversion of elections and being widely seen as a failing democracy. Subsequently, and following a change of government, the Maldives rejoined the Commonwealth on 1 February 2020.

Economy

The economy of the Maldives is based on the principal activities of tourism, fishing and shipping. It is a mixed economy that has delivered a remarkably high level of development, and its per capita income is the highest in the South Asian region.

In no small part, this is due to tourism, which is the largest industry in the Maldives, accounting for 28 percent of GDP and more than 60 percent of the Maldives' foreign exchange receipts. Indeed, tourism enabled the country's GDP per capita to increase by 265 percent in the 1980s and a further 115 percent in the 1990s. Unsurprisingly, some 90 percent of government tax revenue flows in from import duties and tourism-related taxes.

Monetary receipts from the tourism sector have enabled the development of the country's infrastructure throughout all the islands in the Maldives archipelago. With revenue mainly dependent on the tourism industry and its complementary tertiary sectors – transport, distribution, real estate, construction and government – taxes on the tourist industry have been ploughed into infrastructure, and in a positive development have been used to improve technology in the agricultural sector.

A typical scene from Dharu Maarukeytu – one of many ports around the archipelago, used for exchange of all sorts of goods – in the 1970s. (Mark Lepko Collection)

Sun, blue sky and countless and endless beaches with soft sand and clear water have been attracting tourists to the Maldives for decades. Indeed, tourism remains the primary branch of the local economy. (Maldives Ministry of Environment and Energy)

Despite their natural beauty, tourism in the Maldives had a rocky start and only really began in 1972. A United Nations mission on development which visited the Maldives in the 1960s apparently did not recommend tourism as a major industry, making the seemingly bizarre claim that that the islands were not suitable.

However, since the coming of the first tourist resort to the Maldives in 1972, tourism has flourished. From the arrival of the first group of tourists in February 1972, resort tourism in Maldives has skyrocketed. It started with just two resorts with a capacity of about 280 beds, the Kurumba Island Resort being the first resort opened in Maldives, followed by Bandos Island Resort. There are now no fewer than 132 resorts located in most of the different atolls constituting the Republic of Maldives.[16]

Not surprisingly, over the last five decades, the number of tourists visiting the Maldives has risen exponentially. Privately owned guesthouses established through a change in regulations now officially allow tourists to stay among the local population, rather than on privately owned resort islands, thus enhancing the tourist experience as well as enabling individuals to share in the tourist business as entrepreneurs.[17]

Other notable industries around the islands include fishing and agriculture. They have been enabled by investment ploughed into them from the tourism sector, while the waters of the Indian Ocean provide a strong base for commercial and recreational fishing. The agricultural sector is small, limited by the country's size, but it is nonetheless a part of the country's economy. The manufacturing sector, which contributes 18 percent of the Maldives' GDP, is based on garment production, mainly for export to the West and driven heavily by foreign investment, taking advantage of the liberal economy, low tariffs and favourable climate.

Social and Political Problems

During his presidency, as part of a promise to improve prosperity, Gayoom incrementally pushed the Maldivian economy to be based on luxury resort tourism. This inevitably led to a heavy degree of income disparity and issues with distribution. Workers in \$5,000-per-night hotels received small recompense for their work. A scathing article in *The New Statesman*, written in 2008, quoted Tricia Barnett, director of an organisation called Tourism Concern that fights exploitation in global tourism. She stated: 'It is not paradise for anybody … Living conditions for most Maldivians are akin to those in sub-Saharan Africa. There has been no trickle down of the extraordinary amount of money being generated.'

Gayoom's personal wealth was astonishing, and he was not shy about flaunting it. This attracted attention from the Maldives' national auditor, which stated that Gayoom's personal spending was 'out of control'. Gayoom's named assets mentioned \$9.5 million spent on a luxury yacht, and his spending also included \$17 million to renovate the presidential palace and the purchase of 11 speedboats and 55 cars with government money. It was seen as particularly obscene for this kind of corruption to occur when 40 percent of ordinary Maldivians were living on roughly \$1 per day.

Inevitably, this created ample scope for severe public discontent and grievances.[18]

Socially, the income inequality and rapid move towards urbanisation and economic inequality adversely impacted the traditional family structures and community frameworks and values that operated as both a social support network and a form of social security.

This laid a fertile groundwork for a dangerous combination of problems: destitution, crime, Islamic extremism and drug abuse.

While accurate statistics are inevitably difficult to get, some estimates have suggested that one in 10 Maldivians struggle with some form of substance abuse. In recent times, a United Nations Development Program study produced staggering estimates that 40 percent of Maldivian youths were using hard drugs. When consideration is given to the fact that some 60 percent of the population is under 25 years of age, the incidence of drug use is terrifying.[19]

As might be expected with a low-income, youth-heavy population in South Asia, the most popular drug and the one most widely used is a low-grade form of heroin that locals call 'Brown Sugar'. Social scientists further suggest that the country's capital – the densely populated island city of Malé – is not only the ideal environment for the spread of addiction, but also where users find it easy to addict due to their close proximity to other users.[20]

The Maldives, therefore, despite being undoubtedly one of the more prosperous countries in South Asia, has a peculiar blend of social problems, exacerbated by income inequality, the tourist industry and the ready availability of cheap and highly addictive narcotics. This has led to major concerns in recent times, such as a rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism, a persistent piracy problem and a seemingly intractable issue with sustaining democracy, with religious sentiment often being invoked to either support or denounce a political party, often at the behest of foreign powers with agendas entirely of their own.

Thus the Maldives were and are a remarkable country – small, somewhat isolated but very prosperous, with a very interesting socio-economic and political history. Its location in the Arabian Sea gives it a strategic importance which continues to grow. The fate of the Maldives is of concern to regional powers, and it was this that prompted the events of 1988 – both the coup and the Indian response that ended it.

The Politics of the Maldives and the Genesis of the Coup

Gayoom's 'election' in 1988 presented a cause for both opportunity and frustration to his critics. Allegations of the involvement of former President Ibrahim Nasir in the coup attempts of 1980 and 1983 remain unconfirmed, but the fact that Gayoom was elected by a landslide in 1988, with no opposition candidate, did his democratic credentials no good. This enabled opposition forces to consider their chances for ousting the president, However, there was no coherent plan for replacing him with a more democratic entity and nobody clearly articulated a move to multi-party democracy for the republic, which was not surprising considering that Nasir's administration was very authoritarian.

This trend of authoritarianism, sometimes legitimised through uncontested elections, was enabled by the compromising of the Majlis, or what passed for a parliament in the Maldives. That there was no independent constitutional authority capable of deterring such an abuse of process was to eventually have dire consequences for the Maldives as its political history evolved in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In 1980, Ahmed Naseem, Nasir's brother-in-law and a former junior minister, became increasingly concerned that Gayoom's government was getting uncomfortably close to uncovering a large number of fiscal irregularities in the records of the former administration. Adding to his concerns was the investigation into the torture and murder of inmates in the country's Villingili prison in the 1970s, which implicated the minister of public safety under Nasir, one Abdul Hannan Haleem, in those abuses and further soured Naseem's feelings towards the Gayoom administration.[21] This led to the plotting and launching of the first coup attempt against Gayoom, which set in motion a trend of periodic attempts to depose him, all of which would be unsuccessful despite Gayoom's ever-increasing unpopularity and his abuses of power which would culminate in his eventual electoral defeat.

Naseem moved quite decisively, given his resources and the capabilities available to him. In 1980, he joined with a group of Nasir loyalists to engage the services of nine former members of the British Special Air Service (SAS) to stage a coup to oust Gayoom. The fact that Naseem thought that a force of nine would suffice to oust Gayoom is instructive of his assessment of the country's limited military capabilities, which even in 1988 were extraordinarily poor. This coup attempt was shambolic, and although the arms needed – light weapons – arrived, smuggled in diving equipment, Gayoom's administration was alerted to their presence and moved decisively to end the insurgency before it even started. After the abject failure of this coup attempt, Naseem was duly tried and convicted for his involvement and was sentenced to life imprisonment.[22]

In 1983, a local shipping magnate, Reeko Ibrahim Maniku, sought to depose Gayoom through a much more subtle and more difficult to counter mechanism – a parliamentary coup. As the presidential nominee was decided by parliament, Maniku decided on what might be considered quite a potentially effective strategy – he sought to bribe the members ofpParliament as well as the High Court judges who might adjudicate on the candidacy for president. This parliamentary coup, like its more violent counterpart of 1980, failed spectacularly and Maniku was unable to stop Gayoom's nomination and victory, nor able to counter the inevitable rise of Gayoom's power.[23] To give credit, Maniku, though he remained in exile until 2006, did move to enter the democratic process by registering the Social Democratic Party in the years following his return.

These failures did not deter Gayoom's opponents, one of whom, Abdullah Luthufee, was to emerge and almost succeed in orchestrating a spectacularly effective coup with the support of a significant force of Sri Lankan mercenaries. Luthufee was a wealthy businessman with a near-pathological hatred for Gayoom. Gayoom's re-election as president with an even greater 'mandate' on 23 September 1988 (unsurprisingly, as he was again the only candidate) only served to antagonise Luthufee to an even greater extent, and he began plotting to overthrow Gayoom, this time with more money, firepower and trained personnel being committed to the effort.

Luthufee articulated his opposition to Gayoom and his regime in more democratic terms and had some legitimacy as a businessman. He established himself in the 1980s in Sri Lanka, where he operated a duck farm at Kadawatha. He was firmly of the view that the electoral process in the Maldives was fatally flawed and that the system would never allow any opposition party or candidate for the presidency a fair chance at winning any election in the country. Though it perhaps now seems counterintuitive, he was firmly convinced that an armed insurrection would have the open support of a substantial majority of the country, and that the state's sole security force – the National Security Service (NSS) – would at least tacitly support his effort as they too were increasingly discontented with Gayoom's regime. He was to be sadly mistaken in respect of the latter, and would pay a high price for it. However, his location in Sri Lanka enabled him to make and meet the acquaintance of well-armed and well-trained personnel of that country's Tamil insurgents, who were ideally placed to provide him with the services he required and were themselves eager for money to fund their own activities.[24]

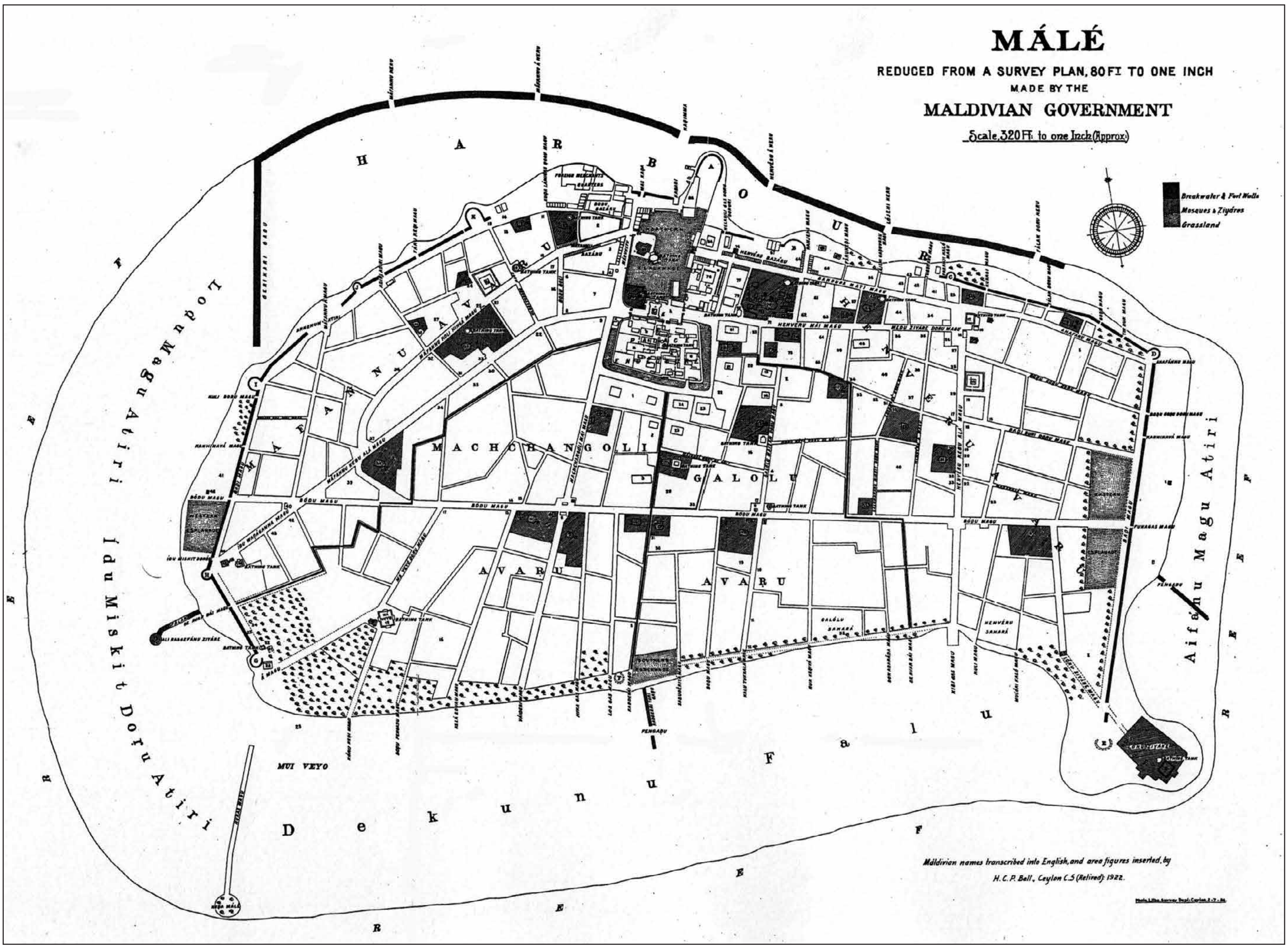
The Sri Lanka Factor – Guns for Hire

Sri Lanka and the Maldives have a rather interesting relationship, though not one particularly relevant to the events of 1988. An ancient Maldivian legend tells a story about a twelfth century Sri Lankan prince named Koi Malé who was stranded in a Maldivian lagoon with his wife, who was the daughter of a Sinhalese king. Koi Malé would go on to establish a new kingdom and rule the country as its first sultan. True or not, it seemed in 1988 as if another Sri Lankan group was trying to replay this event, when Uma Maheswaran, leader of the militant Sri Lankan PLOTE group, on behalf of Luthufee, landed a force 80 well-armed mercenaries to establish a new system of rule in the islands. Sri Lanka's Tamil insurgents thus became guns for hire in this venture.

However, the Tamil fighters were no poorly trained rabble. They were generally highly motivated and well trained, and were given adequate weaponry, either through their own efforts – smuggling or manufacture of weapons including mortars and rocket launchers – or from India, which provided a degree of support and training to a large number of Tamil groups, out of which it hoped to exert a degree of influence on the course of the movement. Yet the Indians were not the driving force behind the Tamil insurgency, which instead had its roots in a rather unsavoury and tragic series of ultimately unforced errors that pitted ethnic Tamils against ethnic Sinhalese, with violence that killed thousands.

The roots of their motivation lay in the devastating Sri Lankan Civil War, which lasted until 2009 and perhaps had its beginning in 1971, though its most devastating phase lasted from about 1983–1987. Nearly 75 percent of Sri Lanka's population is comprised of predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese, while a little over 11 percent is ethnically Tamil. Some 70 percent of the population is Buddhist and over 12 percent is Hindu. However, unlike India – which, though it is 78–80 percent Hindu, is a secular state – Sri Lanka has Buddhism as its de facto state religion. Furthermore, the country's constitution explicitly states, at Chapter II Article 9, that foremost importance shall be given to Buddhism and that the state shall 'foster' that religion.

Following independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, the Sri Lankan Sinhalese majority, which now held the reins of power, began a series of measures that actively discriminated against the Sri Lankan Tamils. The first of these was the Ceylon Citizenship Act, which made it impossible for Indian Tamil workers, who had lived for decades on the island, to acquire citizenship (this was not rectified until 2003). The second measure was perhaps more discriminatory to local Tamils and took the form of the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which was propagated by Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. This was seen as a deliberate attempt to exclude the Tamil-speaking


MÁLÉ
REDUCED FROM A SURVEY PLAN, 80 FT TO ONE INCH
MADE BY THE
MALDIVIAN GOVERNMENT
Scale 320 Ft. to one Inch (Approx)
Breakwater & Fort Walls
Mosques & Ziyáres
Grassland
H A R B O U R
MACHCHANGOLI
GALOLU
AVARU
HENVERU
Lodu Magu Atiri
Idu Miskit Doru Atiri
Aifénu Magu Atiri
Dekunu Falu
MUI VEYO
Máldivian names transcribed into English, and area figures inserted, by H.C.P. Bell, Ceylon C.S. (Retired) 1922.

Map of Malé – capital of the Maldives – as of the early 1980s, based on a map from 1922. (Maldives Government) minority from applying for government jobs, and the language requirement led to many Sri Lankan Tamils being forced out of government service.[25]

Badaranaike's assassination in 1959 resulted in a series of protests against the discriminatory laws, and this led, in 1961, to the arrest of several Tamil members of parliament and to a state of emergency which lasted two years. Rather than prompting a review of these laws, new discriminatory measures were taken in 1972, this time by Bandaranaike's widow, Srimavo, who had been elected to office and adopted a republican constitution. The new discrimination took the form of measures aimed at restricting the number of Tamils admitted to or able to access higher education. Tamil candidates were now required to score higher marks than Sinhalese candidates to access universities.[26]

These measures, combined with the democratic tyranny of demographics – the Sinhalese majority would always be able to dominate electoral politics and pass whatever laws they wished – prompted Tamil politicians to consider rather more drastic measures. This culminated in the Tamil Congress, the Federal party and diverse other groups coalescing into the Tamil United Liberation Front. Tired of trying to work within what they considered to be a broken system, these politicians took the drastic step of deciding that they would begin to campaign for a separate country – the Tamil Eelam – and that the achievement of this goal would, as party politics could not protect the interests of Tamils, be achieved by any means necessary, including armed action.[27]

This set the stage for the creation of an armed insurgency against the Sri Lankan state. The first such effort was rather surprisingly a left-wing, Maoist-inspired Sinhalese movement, the JVP, which launched its campaign to topple the government in 1971. The JVP attempted to reach out to the Tamil minority, but at all times remained Sinhalese dominated. Though it had a brief period of success, the JVP failed in its stated objectives of bringing down the government and was destroyed relatively easily. However, their campaign, which cost the Sri Lankan forces not inconsiderable losses, set the stage for the growth of Tamil insurgent groups. These were able to avoid scrutiny by the state and to build their resources while the Sri Lankan government was otherwise distracted by the JVP and its operations.[28] This failure to destroy these nascent groups would come back to haunt Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan Tamil insurgent groups went through a series of permutations, starting with the Pulip Padai (Army of Tigers) in the 1960s and the Tamil Liberation Organization of 1969. These would then morph and expand into a large number of groups aided by the London-based Eelam Revolutionary Organization, which established connections to various radical movements in Europe, including the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), and also built links to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This enabled the training and equipping of the first serious cadre of Sri Lankan Tamil insurgents which would challenge Sri Lanka's government.[29]

Prior to the 1980s, Sri Lanka's Tamil groups, having seen the failure of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) to politically hinder the discriminatory policies of the Sinhalese majority government which targeted the Tamil minority, formed small armed groups – among them the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) and the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). These groups were mostly capable of conducting only small-scale operations such as bank robberies, a few ambushes and targeted assassinations of politicians and police officials. Their strength usually consisted of no more than a few dozen personnel armed with only small arms.[30]

However, in 1983, after the LTTE ambushed an army patrol, a wave of anti-Tamil pogroms swept Colombo, and this prompted India to start supporting several Sri Lankan Tamil groups.

The LTTE staged an ambush against a 15-man patrol of the Sri Lankan Army on 15 July 1983. This involved what would become an LTTE hallmark – the use of mines and IEDs (improvised explosive devices) to destroy vehicles. Despite being completely taken by surprise and at a disadvantage, the Sri Lankan troops fought back hard. Eventually, however, all but one of the patrol was killed. The ambush unleashed the events of what would be called Black July. In the wave of anti-Tamil violence that followed, no fewer than 600 – and possibly over 1,000 – Tamils were murdered, including 20 being burned alive in a bus. This tide of ethnic hatred and violence sowed the seeds for the Sri Lankan Civil War which compounded the national tragedy.[31]

The LTTE emerged as the strongest of these insurgent groups by 1986 – all but eliminating the TELO and forcing the PLOTE into a very minor position. This resulted in the PLOTE, unable to contest the might of the LTTE or operate against the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) operating against the LTTE, becoming available for hire. It was into this market that Luthufee's agenda and the needs of PLOTE became somewhat synchronised, though it is debatable how much the PLOTE cared for either Luthufee or the Maldives beyond their immediate need for money and possibly a new base of operations.

2

THE OPPOSING FORCES

The Indian and Maldives Military Forces in 1988

India's military in 1988 was in the throes of a transformation and was, albeit in a haphazard manner, reforming its security policy. Its principal foe, Pakistan, was rapidly modernising its own military too, and there was the spectre of conflict between the neighbouring states.

It would not surprise anyone to note that central to India's security is the fact that it is bordered by two countries with which it has serious border disputes. India has a volatile border with Pakistan, and in 1988 was having major issues with a Pakistani-sponsored insurgency in the Indian state of Punjab, along with the beginnings of a dangerous insurgency in the disputed Kashmir region. With China, the border dispute in 1988 was not nearly as serious, though there was and is mutual distrust between the two nations. This has meant that a substantial Indian troop presence has been maintained along the Sino-Indian border since the two countries fought a short but vicious war in 1962, and where there was a major confrontation between the two during 1986 and 1987.

India's internal security issues were substantial throughout the 1980s, with insurgencies springing up and intensifying throughout the country. From the north-east – with ongoing brutal ethnic violence taking place in Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and even Meghalaya and Tripura – to the Punjab, where the Indian Army felt compelled in 1984 to storm the holiest of Sikh shrines,[1] the Golden Temple in Amritsar, to neutralise terrorists holed up there, and to the increasingly intense protests in Kashmir – later to emerge as an armed insurgency – over rigged elections in 1987,[2] India's military was heavily committed to internal security operations. However, its forces were still quite able to also focus on conventional warfare against its hostile and very capable neighbours.

The prime minister of India from 1984–1989 was Rajiv Gandhi, the son of the previous prime minister, Indira Gandhi, who was herself the daughter of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Indira Gandhi was assassinated in 1984 by her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for the assault on the Golden Temple. This led to a vicious pogrom against Sikhs in Delhi, aided by the governing Indian National Congress. Rajiv Gandhi won the 1984 elections in a landslide victory and proceeded to begin a haphazard, though well-intentioned, series of economic and military reforms, along with an expansion of the armed forces.

In 1988, as now, India had arranged its conventional and non-conventional forces to deal with perceived threats from both Pakistan and China. In 1988, the bulk of India's troops were arrayed against Pakistan, but a large force of now fewer than 10 divisions – or close to 200,000 men – was earmarked for use against China, with some major forces being deployed in a tense confrontation with China in 1986 and 1987. The Sino-Pakistan strategic partnership created significant concern in India. In 1986 and 1987, China showed that it had few qualms about selling Pakistan missile technology, and in an egregious act of nuclear proliferation, supplied Pakistan with reliable designs for atomic weapons.

In 1988, India was plagued with issues of poverty, drought and an economy that was performing modestly. However, it was also at this point that a growing middle class was becoming increasingly assertive and important. This group, well-educated and articulate, began to see a role for India in the international arena beyond the very limited one that had hitherto been performed by the country and its military. This led not only to a re-evaluation of the country's foreign policy objectives, but also to an increase in its military forces and a revision of its strategic policy.

The post-1962 period saw a dramatic increase in size and capability of the Indian armed forces. Although the expansion was comprehensive, it was still essentially defensive and had little by way of a power projection capability, even to the islands of the Indian Ocean. The thrust of Indian defence policy was evolved around what the historian R.G.C. Thomas calls the 'minimalist' perspective of being able to fight one 'full' war and one 'half' war.[3] In military terms, this meant that India was capable of fighting a war on land, sea and in the air against Pakistan while being able to fight a defensive border war with China.

China was seen as the most significant threat to India throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and although the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan proved that the Pakistani forces were a very capable adversary, the Indian leadership viewed China's military and economic growth in the 1980s with rising concern. It did not seek to match the Chinese effort though. Despite the substantial growth in India's naval capability and a widening gap in Indian air superiority, India had still confined itself to being able to fight a full-scale offensive war with Pakistan while deploying sufficient forces to fight only a defensive war against China.

By 1988, India had moved on from this position to one where it had the capacity to fight one full war and three half wars. This meant that India would be able to conduct a full war with Pakistan and a defensive border war with China, combined with a latent nuclear weapons capability and the ability to intervene in neighbouring Indian Ocean islands.[4] To this should be added India's nascent nuclear capability, which was being developed to meet a known Pakistani nuclear capability, while the first steps towards the development of SRBMs (Short-Range Ballistic Missiles) and IRBMs (Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles) were being taken to provide a baseline deterrent against China.

India's Military History Post-1971: A Synopsis

India and Pakistan fought three wars following independence in 1947 – in 1948, 1965 and 1971. While there was no major war between 1972 and 1999, the two countries did become involved in several military confrontations.

The first of these took place on 13 April 1984, when the Indian Army launched Operation Meghdoot to seize the Siachen Glacier.[5] Successfully concluded, this led to an ongoing confrontation between India and Pakistan where brigade-sized formations – with ample artillery support and sustained by helicopters – were deployed against each other along the 'Line of Control'. While the seizure of the Siachen Glacier represented a major setback for the Pakistani Army because Pakistan views the glacier as its territory, the scope of the conflict remained limited due to the area's high altitude and freezing temperatures.

The Siachen conflict blooded parts of the Indian and Pakistani armies like no other environment ever could, and turned many of their units into highly capable and experienced mountain and cold-weather troops. While neither side made use of offensive air power – the Indian Air Force (IAF) did consider the employment of its Hawker Hunter fighter jets – both made much use of heliborne logistics, with the Indians gradually fine-tuning their air support. While tensions have meanwhile lessened, both armies remain deployed in the field in this theatre of operations.

A potentially much more serious event took place between 1986 and 1987. In late 1986, India conducted a table-top exercise to explore new integrated mechanised warfare tactics. These evolved into a full-scale exercise – Operation Brasstacks – involving 150,000 men and thousands of tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery pieces and aircraft. However, a series of miscommunications over this exercise led to a massing of forces along the Pakistani border, with Islamabad worried that New Delhi actually planned a major strike to split the country in two with the help of rapidly advancing mechanised units. This apprehension did not result in a war, but Pakistan was rattled by the new Indian strategy and inexorably moved towards nuclearisation, followed by India.

India also faced tensions with China when, following a prolonged uneasy peace that began after India's defeat in the 1962 war, there was a sharp clash at Nathu La and Cho La in 1967 in which 88 Indians and over 300 Chinese soldiers were reported killed. In 1975, an incident led to the deaths of four Indian soldiers of the Assam Rifles in an ambush at Tulung La in Andhra Pradesh. After that, in mid-1987, Chinese and Indian forces were involved in a confrontation in the Sumdrong Chu Valley, prompting the then Chief of Army Staff, Krishnaswamy Sundarji, to receive permission to hold Operation Chequerboard, which involved a substantial increase of 50,000 troops to the strength then present in Arunachal Pradesh, while an exercise involving 10 divisions and several squadrons of the Indian Air Force was held. Three divisions at Wangdung were sustained solely by air, thereby demonstrating to China a capability to support forces in distant areas away from road links, which has proved to be very important for Indian units facing China ever since. The confrontation did not lead to any combat between the countries.[6]

It was into this somewhat usual security environment, fraught with tension on two borders, that then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi initiated Operation Pawan to attempt to force a settlement in the long-running Sri Lankan Civil War between ethnic Tamils and Sinhalese. The Indian Peace Keeping Force deployed, at its peak, some 100,000 personnel to the island and engaged in heavy combat against LTTE insurgents, with some 1,138 Indian soldiers being killed. In an operation lasting over two years, the IPKF proved to be militarily proficient but, as with all civil conflicts, unable to bring about any lasting peace settlement.

India's intervention in Sri Lanka, to which its involvement in the Maldives was but a corollary, was part of a broader redefining of India's view of itself and its place in the world. The country, which had hitherto been a poorly performing economy with endemic poverty and internal political turmoil, saw itself as overcoming some of the worst of its problems and emerging to take its place as both a regional and world power.

This was perhaps somewhat premature, and even today, although India's military capabilities, economic strength and development indices have improved by a large margin, the country remains somewhat cagey about deploying its military in support of its interest, except in humanitarian operations or under the auspices of the United Nations. Perhaps this is a legacy of the heavy casualties suffered in Sri Lanka in a failed effort to bring peace or a realisation that there are less-costly ways to achieve results using a combination of diplomatic and economic pressure, along with the threat of targeted military intervention.

The Indian Military of 1988

The Indian armed forces of 1988 were in the middle of a major expansion and re-equipment programme. This was largely done with inductions of Soviet bloc hardware, but also included a significant Western and locally made component – either by design or under license – in respect of both platforms and ordnance. Local designs of armour and combat aircraft had entered the design phase but were proving quite intractable and problematic, with major challenges being encountered with changing Army and Air Force requirements.

The Indian Air Force of 1988

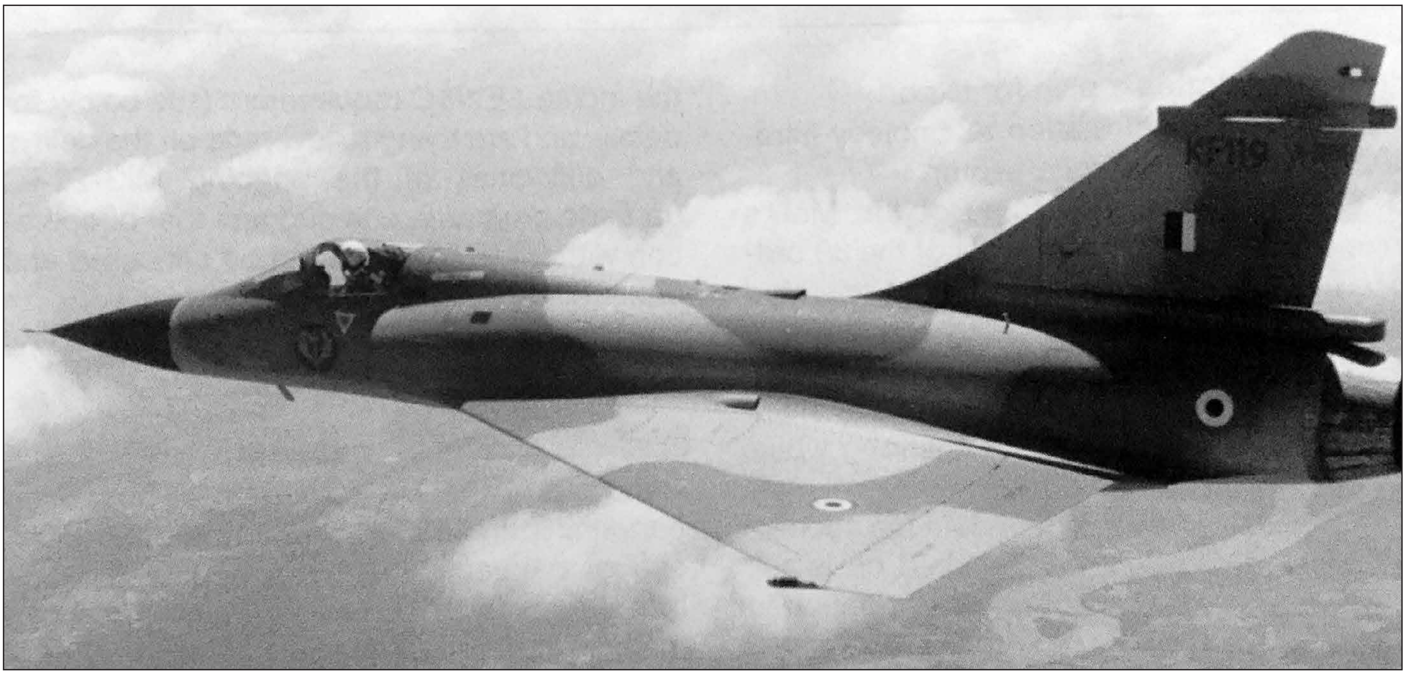
Unlike the IAF of the present day, the Indian Air Force of 1988 had relatively limited long-range capability and was largely, in respect of its combat elements, a short-range, tactical air force. However, its transport assets were increasingly potent and were to prove to be an important element in India's intervention capability.

The IAF of 1988 was perhaps close to the peak of the service's combat squadron strength. Two squadrons of newly inducted Mirage 2000s – Nos. 1 and 7 – along with another two of MiG-29s – Nos. 28 and 47 – formed the cutting edge of the IAF's interception capability.[7] The Mirage 2000s, however, were still in the progress of receiving their complement of Super 530D missiles and Belouga submunition systems. The MiG-29s were initially armed with R-23 and R-60 air-to-air missiles, but the R-23s were in the process of being replaced by vastly superior R-27 systems in both their SARH and IR guided variants.

Augmenting the MiG-29 and Mirage 2000 were three squadrons of Jaguar fighter-bombers – Nos. 5, 14 and 27 squadrons. The former Canberra squadrons – No. 6 and No. 16 – were earmarked for re-equipment, and this was subsequently accomplished. The Jaguars were the most potent strike assets in the IAF at that time.[8]

Six squadrons flew the MiG-23. Four of these were tactical strike squadrons with MiG-23BNs, while two more were interceptor squadrons with MiG-23MFs. The latter type, with R-23 and R-60 missiles, was inducted as an interim response to the Pakistani Air Force deploying F-16s and were deemed to be useful but modest assets. The MiG-23BN was an effective tactical strike platform, replacing the Su-7 in that role.[9]

The MiG-27, which was now, alongside the Jaguar, being manufactured by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, had begun to equip No. 9 and No. 222 squadrons and would eventually equip



A Mirage 2000H during pre-delivery testing in France. (Dassault, via Tom Cooper)

INDIAN AIR FORCE

About 50 Mil Mi-8T helicopters acquired in the early 1980s formed the backbone of the IAF's helicopter fleet. (IAF)

An An-12B of the Indian Air Force, seen in the early 1980s. The type was showing its age at the time, and in the process of being replaced by a mix of turboprop-powered Antonov An-32s and jet-powered Ilyushin Il-76s. (Photo by Gulshan Luthra)

no fewer than six IAF squadrons. Among the items of ordnance obtained for the MiG-27 fleet were Kh-25, Kh-25MP, Kh-29L and Kh-23 missiles.

The MiG-21, in its FL, M, MF and bis versions (production of the latter only ceasing at HAL in 1987), equipped no fewer than 19 squadrons – Nos. 3, 4, 8, 15, 17, 21, 23, 24, 26, 29, 40, 32, 37, 40, 45, 51, 52, 101 and 108. While functioning as multi-role platforms with unguided rockets and bombs of up to 500kg – with the MF also capable of using the X-66 missile – the MiG-21 was primarily an interceptor and a mix of K-13, R-60 and R.550 air-to-air missiles were carried.

Alongside these supersonic combat assets were four squadrons of vintage platforms. A single squadron – No. 20 – continued to fly the Hawker Hunter (which also served as an advanced trainer) – while three more – Nos. 2, 22 and 28 – continued to fly the HAL Ajeet in the close support role. These aircraft were of limited capability but were all capable of carrying unguided rockets and bombs in the close support role. However, there was some work done in integrating the R-60 missile with the Hawker Hunter.[10]

Reconnaissance and electronic warfare assets rested on No. 35 Squadron, with MiG-21s and Canberras in service, No. 106 Squadron, using the Canberra PR.57, and No. 102 Squadron, using the MiG-25R. The latter two types were to provide invaluable strategic reconnaissance information over the course of several decades.

The IAF's combat assets included some 38 SAM squadrons – 30 using a mix of SA-2 and SA-3 systems and eight employing OSA-AKM (SA8b) systems. The IAF SAM inventory eventually replaced all SA-2 squadrons, which peaked at a strength of 21 squadrons, with SA-3s. The latter type, eventually equipping 30 squadrons, continues to form the backbone of the IAF SAM force to date, though it is increasingly viewed as being obsolete, despite upgrades aimed at keeping them viable against present threats.[11]

Combat assets also included four helicopter units – one (125HU) with Mi-25 gunships and three of Chetaks, one of which was equipped with SS.11B1 anti-tank missiles. The Mi-25s and SS.11-armed Chetaks saw extensive service in Sri Lanka, with the former

IL-76MD
AIR FORCE

Prime Minister Narasimha Rao (centre, wearing white suit), with Wing Commander Ashok Goel, CO of No. 44 Squadron (right), in front of the first Il-76MD delivered to India in 1985. (Indian MOD Release)

even dropping 250kg bombs in addition to its more usual 57mm rockets and AT-2 'Swatter' anti-tank missiles (plus its 12.7mm rotary machine gun), while the Chetaks and their SS.11B1s were deployed for 'precision' strikes. Four additional units used the Cheetah for liaison and observation duties and for light transport. The Chetak and Cheetah, despite being poorly equipped for the reconnaissance role, have proved to be very reliable platforms and remain in service until this day. The IAF and Indian Army aviation corps armed several Chetaks and Cheetahs with 7.62mm MAG machine guns during Operation Pawan, and viewed this particular modification as being very effective and surprisingly versatile for supporting ground troops as well as deterring attacks on troop transport helicopters.[12]

Other helicopter assets for the transport role included one unit with Mi-26 heavy lift helicopters (126HU) and eight with a combination of Mi-8 and Mi-17 helicopters which could also be armed with 57mm rocket pods. The Mi-8 and Mi-17 units were to prove their worth during Operation Pawan and remained a useful asset for proximate interventions.[13] The Mi-8 and Mi-17 replaced the Mi-4 helicopter in IAF service and have proven to be the most effective medium-lift helicopters operated by the IAF since its inception.

In 1988, their potential was still being realised, with more and more Indian soldiers becoming used to heliborne operations and new tactics being devised to make effective use of these assets on the subcontinental battlefield. However, their numbers were as yet relatively modest and would require judicious use to achieve the greatest effect. This was not always easy as the IAF as yet lacked full night-operations capability for the type, and this led to complications.

The IAF also maintained a large transport fleet, largely of tactical transports but including some significant strategic transport assets. Rather surprisingly, two squadrons of vintage platforms still soldiered on. One squadron still flew the DHC-3 Otter, which used its STOL capabilities to great effect. Another squadron (No. 33) may have still operated a few DHC-4 Caribous, which though nominally withdrawn in 1986, might still have had a presence in IAF service.[14]

The HAL-built HS.748 filled a multiplicity of tasks, with some 60 aircraft being in IAF service. They aided in the carriage of freight, the transport of personnel and liaison tasks. Though not designed as a military transport, the type performed good service for the IAF and remains in service to date, despite its evident shortcomings.[15]

From 1984 onwards, the IAF began receiving An-32 tactical transports, and their induction into six squadrons was able to completely transform the air force's airlift capabilities with their enhanced payload and troop transport capabilities. They were used extensively to support Indian troops during Operation Pawan, and the six squadrons of the type continue to form the backbone of India's tactical transport fleet to this day. The An-32 was reportedly specially aimed at the Indian market as the An-26 was deemed by the IAF to have a wholly inadequate performance from 'hot and high' airfields.[16]

Strategic airlift in 1988 was provided by one squadron of An-12 (No. 25) and one of Il-76 (No. 44) heavy transports. Sufficient Il-76 aircraft would be obtained to allow the conversion of one flight of No. 25 Squadron (the other operating An-32s), but in 1988, the An-12 and Il-76 reigned as the IAF's long-range transport assets and were to prove decisive during Operation Cactus.[17] The An-12s were adapted for use as makeshift bombers during the 1971 war and were reputed to be very effective in that role.

It should also be noted that many Indian Air Force combat types – MiG-21s, MiG-27s and Jaguars – its training aircraft – the HPT-32, HT-2 and HJT-16 – as well the Chetak and Cheetah helicopters, alongside the HS-748 transport, were being manufactured either under license or as indigenous designs by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). While there were undoubtedly problems with HAL's production, schedules and quality, its effort contributed enormously to the growth and modernisation of the IAF between the 1970s and 1980s.

The Indian Navy in 1988

The Indian Navy of 1988 was a large and growing force. At its core were two aircraft carriers – INS *Vikrant* and INS *Viraat* – each of which operated a mixed air group of British Aerospace Sea Harrier FRS.Mk 51 combat aircraft (30 of which were acquired by the Indian Navy) armed with Matra R.550 Magic Mk.I air-to-air missiles and Sea Eagle anti-ship missiles, Westland Sea King Mk.42A/B/C helicopters (some 40 being acquired, with the B version carrying Sea Eagle missiles in addition to the Anti Submarine Warfare gear of the A model) and Chetak helicopters in the search-and-rescue (SAR) role. Fourteen submarines – eight Foxtrot-class, four Kilo-class and two Type 1500-class – were in service, all armed with 533mm torpedoes.[18] A single Charlie-1-class cruise missile submarine (SSGN) – INS *Chakra* – was in service but was returned to the Soviet Union when its three-year lease expired in 1991.

These were escorted by five Rajput-class (modified Kashin-class) air defence destroyers (armed with Soviet-made SA-N-1 SAMs, SS-N-2C anti-ship missiles and Kamov Ka-25 helicopters) and three Godavari-class anti-submarine warfare frigates (fitted with Soviet-made SA-N-4 SAMs and SS-N-2C anti-ship missiles, along with two Sea King helicopters – one often replaced with a Chetak). The latter were heavily upgraded and modified versions of the Leander-class, six of which still served the Indian Navy as anti-submarine warfare escorts and, with their 4½-inch guns (also carrying British-made GWS.24 Seacat SAMs and a Chetak or Sea King helicopter), as naval gunfire support vessels. Two Whitby-class frigates – INS *Trishul* and INS *Talwar* – were modified with SS-N-2C missiles and AK-230 (CIWS) close-in weapons system, and remained in service.[19]

INS *Godavari*, the lead ship of this unique class, based on the design of the British-made Leander, but largely armed with Soviet-designed weapons. (Indian MOD Release)

While the Indian Navy was increasing its surface fleet, it should be noted that the Rajput-class destroyers were its most potent assets, and even then, these vessels were carrying a somewhat dated armament by 1988. A pattern of periodic upgrades and overhauls kept the vessels viable; the fact that four of five of the ships are still in service is a testament to the soundness of the design and to its adaptability. The ageing SA-N-1 SAMs are still operational, perhaps indicative of upgrades similar to those done on the Indian Air Force's SA-3 Pechora SAMs, while Brahmos missiles replaced the SS-N-2C.

The Godavari-class, however, was a much more interesting project, starting out as a proposal to equip the Leander-class frigates with the weapons system of India's Nanuchka-class corvettes. An earlier proposal to equip the old Crown Colony-class light cruiser INS *Mysore* with this armament was seriously considered by the Indian Navy, considering that the cruiser's hull was in excellent shape. However, the ageing machinery of the vessel and the extent of the modernisation required militated against taking such a step, and the ship was decommissioned in the mid-1980s after serving for its last years with distinction as a cadet training ship. The Navy's experience with modifying the two Whitby-class vessels, with their delays and problems, was also a major factor in deciding against upgrading the INS *Mysore*.

The Godavaris then became an entirely new design, albeit one based on the Leander-class vessels. Appreciating the very modest anti-aircraft and anti-ship armament of the Leander-class – even as modified in Indian service – the Godavaris received a new SAM system in the form of the SA-N-4 and anti-ship missiles in the form of SS-N-2Cs. Appreciating the need for a CIWS, the AK-230 of the Rajput-class was added and the 57mm AK-257 from the Nanuchka-class formed the main gun armament, primarily in the anti-aircraft role, though with some anti-surface capability, all systems being radar-directed for dramatically enhanced accuracy. The anti-submarine equipment was also enhanced with new, locally designed sonar and two 324mm torpedo tubes which initially used Italian Whitehead A-244S torpedoes but later an Indian derivative, the NST-58. The biggest change was the deployment of two Sea King Mk.42 helicopters in a hangar, though most peacetime deployments were with one Sea King and one Chetak, which proved itself over and over as a versatile utility helicopter, performing everything from search-and-rescue functions to armed escort with 7.62mm machine guns and even anti-submarine warfare roles carrying 324mm torpedoes, though without any sensors for that task.

Surface combatants were augmented by 12 Petya-class ASW corvettes, used as light frigates, three Durg-class corvettes (versions of the Nanuchka-class but with four SS-N-2C missiles instead of SS-N-9s) and eight OSA-II-class missile boats. Coastal patrol assets included a number of Sukanya-class OPVs (offshore patrol vessels) and Seaward Defence Boats, all with 40mm L/60 Bofors. The Indian Navy was in the process of ordering a new family of missile boats – based on the Soviet Tarantul-class and to be license-built in country – some Pauk-class ASW corvettes to augment the Petya-class fleet and a new generation of missile corvettes – the Khukri-class, which would serve as a replacement for the Petya-class but with an emphasis on anti-surface as opposed to anti-submarine warfare. Of note is the fact that nearly all India's new small naval craft and its frigates were being designed and built in India. However, nearly all anti-aircraft and anti-ship systems – from missiles to CIWS to guns – were being imported from the USSR, though anti-submarine armament and sensors as well as surveillance radars were increasingly based on improvements to and indigenous adaptations of license-manufactured foreign designs with considerable local input and indigenous design capability being manifest in sonar technology for surface ships.

The Indian Navy was not shy of deploying its missile vessels and corvettes on deep-water operations, supported by the Navy's small force of fleet tankers, a significant distance from the India coast. The Nanuchka-class, while heavily armed, were poor sea boats

The Indian Navy's first aircraft carrier, INS *Vikrant* (R11), was nearing the end of its service life in the late 1980s, but its air component – including Sea Harrier fighter-bombers and Sea King anti-submarine helicopters – was well trained and would, once again, prove its worth during the intervention in the Maldives. (Tom Cooper collection)

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A Sea King Mk.42 helicopter during pre-delivery testing in Great Britain. The type entered Indian service with two units, of which INAS 336 served as a conversion outfit, while INAS 330 became the operational unit, which frequently provided detachments embarked on warships of the Navy. (Tom Cooper Collection)

and suffered heavily in rough weather. The Petya-class, although possessing one of the Indian Navy's heaviest ASW armament – a combination of RBU-2500 ASW mortars and 533mm heavy-weight torpedo tubes – was armed with 76mm guns for its sole anti-aircraft defence. These vessels also suffered heavily in bad weather, and maintenance problems were becoming a major concern for the Indian Navy. Indeed, this culminated in the loss of one frigate – INS *Andaman* – in 1990.

Added to these must be included the two Leopard-class frigates (INS *Beas* and INS *Betwa*) of the training squadron, with their 4½-inch guns and 40mm Bofors L/60s.[20] These two old frigates were supported by INS *Tir*, a purpose-built training vessel which was armed with 40mm Bofors weapons as its primary armament. As cadet training ships, these three vessels served the Indian Navy extremely well and were able to carry a large complement of personnel, all of whom could be armed for dealing with low-intensity threats. Rifles and machine guns were carried by these vessels in sufficient quantities to pose a substantial threat to any lightly armed assailant, a fact which would become very significant in the anti-piracy operations undertaken in the early twenty-first century.

Naval aviation, besides the carrier-based Sea Harriers, included a fleet of some 40 Sea Kings of varying types, five Kamov Ka-25s and a large number of Chetaks in the utility role, but with some carrying ASW torpedoes. Pride of place, however, went to the three land-based maritime reconnaissance/ASW squadrons. These included INAS 310 with the survivors of 14 Breguet Alize aircraft that were formerly embarked on INS *Vikrant* (shore-based following its fitment with a ski-jump ramp for the Sea Harriers), INAS 312 with the first of a total of eight TU-142M Bear-F long-range MR/ASW aircraft and INAS 315 with five Il-38 May MR/ASW aircraft. These assets were to play an important role during Operation Cactus.

The Indian Navy traditionally maintained relatively modest amphibious capabilities but had in 1971 carried out a single amphibious operation to capture Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh. Romeo Force was an ad hoc entity and comprised a single Gorkha battalion along with elements of the Bihar Regiment and some artillery. These were embarked on a merchant ship, the *Vishwa Vijay*, and the troops conducted the operation against Cox's Bazaar between 13 and 15 December 1971, facing no resistance but also being extremely vulnerable to hostile fire had any been offered. It should be noted that the Navy's amphibious assets consisted mainly of landing craft rather than larger vessels.

By 1988, the Indian Navy had only marginally improved its amphibious assault capabilities. Its assets consisted of one vessel, INS *Magar* of a new class of locally built tank landing ships (the other, INS *Gharial*, would not be commissioned until 1992). Earlier, one ex-Royal Navy LST-3-class tank landing ship, rechristened INS *Magar* – which was purchased in 1951 and which was effectively awaiting disposal by 1988 – was the sole LST possessed by the Indian Navy. Other assets included some six out of an order of 10 Polnocny-class landing ships and six locally designed and built Vasco da Gama-class LCUs (Landing Craft Utility), each capable of carrying 120 troops and 250 tons of cargo. India possessed, in 1988, the ability to transport a small brigade with supporting equipment if all its amphibious assets could be brought to bear for the task.[21]

It should also be noted that, like the Indian Air Force, the Indian Navy was supported by a strong, if none-too-sophisticated, domestic industry. Indian shipyards built several patrol vessels, six Leander-class frigates, the three vessels of the Godavari-class and a number of amphibious warfare vessels. While there were significant issues with the cost, poor delivery schedules and even the quality of Indian-built ships, there was progressive improvement and local designs were encouraged, standing the Navy in good stead into the twenty-first century.

The Indian Army of 1988

In 1988, the Indian Army maintained Intervention Units at the battalion, brigade and divisional level. At battalion level were the para commando battalions; at brigade level the 340th Independent Brigade and the 50th Para Brigade; and at division level the 54th Air Assault Division.

The Indian Army of 1988 consisted of 10 corps-sized formations, with a total of 36 divisions and a number of independent brigades. The cutting edge of the Indian Army is centred around two powerful Strike Corps – each built around one armoured division. The other eight corps are defined as Holding Corps, though they may have significant offensive potential. The Indian Army was in the throes of a reorganisation programme in 1988, and this meant that several formations were being converted and re-tasked while being re-equipped.[22]

The basic infantry fighting formation in the Indian Army was and is the battalion, which is composed of four rifle companies and headquarters and support companies. Its heaviest weapons are generally mortars and machine guns, though some may also have anti-tank and surface-to-air missiles. In addition to basic infantry battalions, mechanised, parachute and commando battalions also exist, each created, trained and equipped for a special role.

Table 1: Indian Army Commands, 1988

Command	Headquarters	Subordinate Units (Base)
HQ Indian Army	New Delhi	50th Independent Parachute Brigade (Agra)
Central Command	Lucknow	I Corps (currently assigned to South Western Command) I Corps (Mathura) X Corps (Bhatinda)
Eastern Command	Kolkata	23rd Infantry Division (Ranchi)
		III Corps (Dimapur)
		IV Corps (Tezpur)
		XXXIII Corps (Siliguri)
Northern Command	Udhampur	XIV Corps (Leh)
		XV Corps (Srinagar)
		XVI Corps (Nagrota)
Southern Command	Pune	
		XII Corps (Jodhpur)
Western Command	Chandimandir	
		II Corps (Ambala)
		IX Corps (Yol)
		XI Corps (Jalandhar)

Artillery and armoured formations have battalion-sized equivalents called regiments. These are organised in a similar manner – armoured regiments have four tank squadrons, while artillery regiments have either three or four artillery batteries. All of these formations are of similar size, about 1,000-men strong. Battalion-sized formations are amalgamated with other formations to form brigades.

In the Indian Army, the most important formation is the brigade. Like the battalion, there are armour and artillery equivalents, but all share a basic similarity of structure. A brigade consists of three battalions or regiments and is usually provided with some supporting equipment – artillery and heavy mortars in the case of armour and infantry units. Some brigades, however, are designed to operate independently, and these are given more supporting elements, including engineering and signals as well as additional artillery.

Brigades are usually grouped together, with additional artillery, engineering, signals and other support elements, to form a division. India and Pakistan operate two basic types of division: infantry and armoured. India's infantry divisions are divided into plains and mountains formations, which, as their names suggest, are trained and equipped to fight in different geographic environments. The mountain divisions are primarily earmarked for use against China, though they can be converted for use on the plains after re-equipment.[23]

A typical infantry division comprises three infantry brigades, an artillery brigade and an armoured regiment. Support elements include an engineer regiment (as described in Table 3), a signal regiment and an air observation post flight, in addition to medical, transport, supply and repair units. Mountain divisions lack the armoured regiment and tend to have smaller-calibre artillery. They also have more engineering and support/logistics elements than plains formations.

As noted above, the 340th Independent Infantry Brigade and the 54th Infantry Division serve as intervention forces alongside the 50th Parachute Brigade.

Infantry Weapons

In 1988, Indian infantry units were armed with the Ishapore 1A1 automatic rifle – a version of the 7.62mm FN-FAL – as its primary infantry weapon. Each section of 11 men was also issued with one or two 7.62mm 1Bs – local versions of the L4A4 light machine guns – and one 84mm Carl Gustav recoilless rocket launcher, though in 1988 Carl Gustavs were still allocated at platoon and company level.[24]

Platoon-level firepower was augmented by a 51mm mortar, and each battalion had eight 7.62mm FN MAG (known as the Ishapore 2A1) machine guns assigned to it along with six 81mm mortars. All weapons were made in India. In many ways, at section, platoon, company and battalion level, the Indian Army was almost completely supplied with local products. While there were issues with delivery schedules and often with the quality of weapons supplied, the Indian infantry was relatively well provided for with infantry equipment and was moving slowly towards an upgrade of their basic weapon.[25]

The Sterling submachine carbine – known locally as the 9mm 1A1 – was in widespread service as a personal defence weapon for section leaders and officers. A number of Kalashnikov variants were in the process of induction to augment the firepower of paratroopers and para commandos, but the SLR remained the main battle rifle.[26]

Interestingly, the Indian Army had considered procuring new 5.56mm rifles, and among those trialled was the H&K G41. A small number of these were issued to para commandos during operations in Sri Lanka. The Indian INSAS family of rifles and machine guns was at an advanced stage of development in 1988.

India's Parachute Brigade was equipped with standard infantry weapons, with the Ishapore 1A being the standard battle rifle for the para battalions. However, the D-5 parachute precluded drops with Ishapore SLRs, and many paras carried Sterling carbines instead.

Battalion support weapons were in the main unchanged, with the FN MAG machine gun and 81mm mortars dominating. The anti-tank weapons of the infantry battalion were in the process of changing to ATGMs (Anti-Tank Guided Missiles), with the Milan, Fagot and Konkurs entering service. Of interest is the fact that old SS.11B1s, widely used by the Indian Army in the 1970s, were still in service, being used in the bunker-busting role in the Siachen Glacier operation well into the 1990s.

Even in 1988, the 106mm M40A1 and 57mm M18 recoilless rifles (the latter being assigned to mountain formations) were in widespread service, with the former being a particularly useful weapon to 50th Para Brigade's battalions.

The 106mm M40A1, mounted on jeeps, was the principal anti-tank and direct-fire support weapon available to India's paratroopers. These weapons replaced 6-pdr anti-tank guns with India's Parachute Brigade from the mid-1960s and were, by 1988, becoming virtually obsolete in their assigned anti-armour role.

The issuing of ATGMs of the Milan type to the Para Brigade was in progress, and these would, as with the infantry, completely replace the old 106mm recoilless guns. The M18 57mm recoilless rifles took longer to be phased out as the need for their replacement was somewhat less acute owing to the threat perception posed by China.

Artillery

India's tube artillery regiments each possessed 18 guns, each divided into three six-gun batteries. These were classed as mountain, field, medium, heavy, para and light or heavy mortar units.

In 1988, the Indian artillery was in the throes of expansion and re-equipment. Traditionally, field regiments were equipped with the venerable 25-pdr of Second World War vintage, while medium regiments had the 5½-inch howitzer. India's sole heavy regiment had the 7.2-inch howitzer in its Mk.6 configuration. Other systems such as the Soviet 100mm M1944 anti-tank/field gun were phased out despite possessing a good performance.[27]

The 25-pdr was a remarkably long-lived weapon in Indian service which served with distinction from the Second World War, through the 1965 and 1971 India–Pakistan wars and well into the 1980s. They were only phased out in 1991, but continued in service with India's Border Security Force for several more years.

The 5½-inch gun and the 7.2-inch howitzer were also of Second World War vintage, and their replacements were in progress by either the 130mm M-46 or 155mm FH-77-B02 gun. The latter two types have emerged as the mainstay of India's artillery from the late 1980s to the present date.

The mountain regiments were – in the past – equipped with either 76mm Yugoslav-made M48 guns, 105mm OTO Melara M56 howitzers or an Indian-designed 75/24mm howitzer. The latter type proved to be a very versatile weapon, continuing in service as a lightweight, long-range weapon that even saw service in the 1999 Kargil War.[28]

India's first effort in indigenous design and manufacture of artillery was that of a modest replacement for the ageing 3.7-inch howitzers. The result was the sturdy, long-ranged 75/24mm pack-howitzer, loosely based on a Canadian design, which served with mountain artillery regiments for decades. This weapon, though firing a light 14lb shell, had a range of 12.8km and saw action in the 1971 India–Pakistan War in the eastern theatre. This weapon was successful enough to serve in the Kargil War of 1999, where it was used in both the indirect and direct fire role.

After the 1971 war, priority was accorded to replacing the 25-pdr in field regiments, and the result was the 105mm Indian Field Gun. The ARDE (Armament Research and Development Establishment) developed the 105mm Indian Field Gun (IFG) in the 1970s, which became a mainstay of the Indian field regiments. While heavy at 3,400kg, the gun had respectable range of 17.4km and proved to be reasonably successful in service. By 1988, the process of equipping all mountain and field regiments with the Indian-designed and manufactured 105mm IFG, or its lighter counterpart, the Indian Light Field Gun (LFG) was underway. These two weapons equipped a substantial proportion of the Indian field artillery regiments, with 25-pdrs and 122mm D30s completing the rest.

Medium regiments were in the process of receiving more 130mm M-46 field guns. This weapon was extraordinarily popular in Indian service, though deemed to be more suited to combat in the plains as opposed to the mountains.[29] The 122mm D30 howitzer was a less popular weapon in Indian service, and thus was largely relegated to the infantry formations deployed on the plains, where their traverse and decent range made them quite useful. That said, they were viewed as delivering too light a shell, and as such the type had few supporters.

A well-camouflaged battery of Indian LFGs during deployment in Punjab. (Indian Ministry of Defence)

The 155/39 Bofors FH77/B02 gun/howitzer was ordered in 1986 and was in the process of equipping 20 regiments. The Bofors gun was the subject of much controversy at the time of purchase, and plans to license-produce over 1,000 guns in India were scrapped, thereby totally disrupting the Indian Army's artillery modernisation plans for decades.[30]

Rocket regiments, of which the Indian Army operated five in 1988, were equipped with BM-21 multiple rocket launchers firing locally manufactured rockets. In 1988, 40 light regiments were each equipped with a dozen local versions of the Brandt AM-50 mortar, and these were assigned initially on the basis of one per division, with some additional units earmarked for the mountains. A single heavy mortar regiment equipped with 160mm Tampella mortars was also on strength, the last unit operating the type which had peaked at the modest strength of two regiments from 1962 to the 1980s.

Self-propelled artillery was very limited: 68 Abbot 105mm self-propelled guns and 48 Catapult 130mm self-propelled guns (the latter being a 130mm M-46 placed on a Vijayanta chassis) were the sole self-propelled artillery systems in Indian service.

India's 50th Para Brigade had maintained artillery units with 75mm pack howitzers, but these were later replaced with an Indian-designed 75/24mm howitzer, developed to replace the 76mm M48 Yugoslav mountain guns and OTO Melara M56 105mm pack howitzers. The field artillery regiments attached to 340th Independent Brigade and 54th Infantry/Air Assault Division were equipped with the Indian-designed and manufactured 105mm IFG or its lighter counterpart, the LFG.

Air Defence Artillery

The late 1970s and 1980s saw a plethora of modern air defence (AD) systems becoming part of the inventory. The pace of induction of the L/70 gun system was accelerated to replace the ageing L/60. A massive infusion of equipment from the former Soviet Union came to India's rescue. The L/70 gun system took care of the point defence, but the field army had been completely neglected. The ZU-23 twin guns and the Strela-2M (SA-7), and later on the Igla-1M (SA-16) shoulder-fired systems, were inducted for the infantry divisions. The armoured divisions received the Shilka four-barrelled all-weather mobile system for point defence. In addition, numbers of the OSA-AK mobile all-weather system to take on the increasing attack helicopter threat were also provided to infantry divisions. Meanwhile, Strela 10-M (SA-13) mobile infrared SAM systems were provided to independent armoured brigades and Kvadrat all-weather systems for area air defence of the Strike Corps.[31]

In 1988, the Indian Army Air Defence Artillery had, in pride of place, two AD missile groups – the 501st and 502nd – equipped with Kvadrat SA-6 surface-to-air missiles. In addition, there were 33 regiments with Bofors L-40/70 towed anti-aircraft guns and four with ZSU-23-4 self-propelled AA. These were complemented by a number of mobile point-defence missile regiments with OSA-AKM

A T-72M1, the principal main battle tank of the Indian Army since the 1980s, during an exercise in the Ramgarh Desert in north-east India. (Indian Ministry of Defence)

SA-8b and Strela-10M SA-13 missile units, with a large number of Strela-2M MANPADS being in service.[32]

Armour

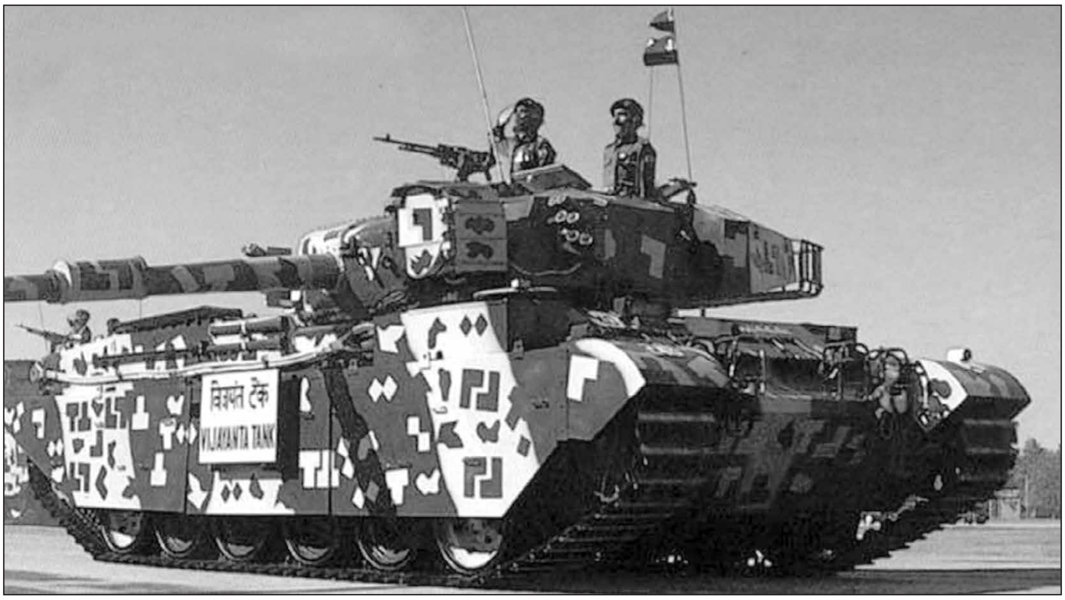
Indian armour was and is divided into three basic formations:

- armoured divisions;
- independent armoured brigades; and
- armoured regiments assigned to infantry divisions.

Depending on their type, these formations were equipped with three types of main battle tanks: the Soviet-made T-72M1, modified T-55s of very diverse origins and the Indian-made (though British-designed) Vijayanta. The T-72M1 was destined to become the principal tank of the Indian Army, though in 1988 the Vijayanta held that position by quite a margin. Over 1,000 T-55 tanks were procured from the late 1960s, while more than 2,100 Vijayantas were produced in India between 1965 and 1986.[33]

The Vijayanta was issued to armoured regiments attached to infantry divisions, and while it had an excellent L7A2 105mm gun, its armour, 80mm thick at most, was deemed inadequate, as was its problematic L60 engine and transmission. The T-55, in contrast, had been up-gunned with the L7A2 105mm gun and was a well-regarded vehicle in Indian service, though its fire-control system was deemed inadequate.

India's Vijayanta combined the L7 gun with the engine, transmission and fire-control system of the Chieftain into a lighter tank with only 80mm of armour. Given the fact that the armour of the modern Centurion, which the Indian Army also possessed, was nearly double that, it is almost inexplicable why this decision was made. Furthermore, the engine and transmission of the Chieftain were not particularly reliable, so the Vijayanta was a maintenance nightmare.



Designed by Vickers for export and as a lighter alternative to the Centurion, the Vijayanta was the first modern tank manufactured in India. (Indian Ministry of Defence)

Vijayanta crews during a briefing in front of one of their tanks. (Photo by Kunal Biswas)

Nonetheless, the Vijayanta was built in quantity – augmented with direct purchases of close to 1,400 T-54/-55 tanks from the USSR and Czechoslovakia – many of which were to be fitted with the Vijayanta's gun. The Vijayanta became an Indian tank with high levels of indigenisation by content and value, and spawned many variants, including bridge-layers, recovery vehicles and the Catapult SP Gun.

The Indian Army had operated several PT-76 and AMX-13 light tanks, but these were phased out of service by 1988. An attempt to create a new light tank on the BMP-2 chassis was a stillborn effort, despite successfully being developed and demonstrated, owing to an apparent lack of interest from the Indian Army. This decision would later come back to haunt them.

The mechanisation of a number of infantry battalions was in progress, with the BMP-1 being used to equip some 25 battalions, augmenting older APCs (armoured personnel carriers) such as the BTR-60PB and the OT-62 and OT-64. The latter three APC types were by 1988 ageing, and the BMP would come to replace them completely. Some 110 BRDM armoured cars, along with two battalions of 'Striker' versions with Konkurs ATGMs, were also in service.

A column of up-gunned T-55 tanks of the Indian Army on a military parade. (Bharat-Rakshak)

The Army Aviation Corps

Formed in 1986, the Army Aviation Corps (AAC) absorbed most of the IAF's Chetak and Cheetah units into newly formed helicopter squadrons. The AAC operated over 100 helicopters of each type and was capable of conducting independent reconnaissance, liaison and surveillance operations without need for IAF assistance. However, in these tasks, the AAC was handicapped by the lack of specialised surveillance equipment on its helicopters, the absence of night-vision equipment and the very limited armament of its machines – limited at the time to a single 7.62mm FN MAG on a handful of aircraft for the close support role.

Like the Indian Navy and Air Force, the Indian Army was supported by domestic industry. By 1988, almost all infantry weapons were locally manufactured, while 105mm artillery and 120mm mortars were produced along with their associated ammunition. Production of the T-72 tank and the BMP-2 ICV (Infantry Combat Vehicle) was in progress at Avadi, and while the Indian Army used few local designs, production – with a reasonably large percentage of indigenous components – of most of its main weapon systems were in progress.

Indian Army Intervention Formations: The 54th Air Assault Division – A Premature Experiment

In 1985, the visionary Indian Chief of Army Staff, General Krishnaswamy Sundarji, began experimenting with converting the 54th Infantry Division to an Air Assault Division. The increasing strength of the Indian Air Force's inventory of Mi-8 helicopters, with their enhanced capabilities, lent itself to this experiment. Prior to this experiment, the Indian Army had conducted a single major heliborne operation in combat. This was the Meghna bridge heli-lift during the 1971 war, when a force of Mi-4 helicopters performed 110 sorties to lift the entire Indian Army 311th Brigade across the Meghna on 9 December 1971.

The 54th Infantry Division was raised in 1966 at Secunderabad, and its initial order of battle consisted of the usual three infantry brigades and one artillery brigade.[34] As part of the Indian Army's Strategic Reserve, consisting of some four divisions, to be deployed as needed, the 54th Infantry Division was used as an experiment in airmobile operations. In 1981/82, one of its brigades had been given training in amphibious operations, while in 1986/87, the 47th Infantry Brigade was given heliborne training as part of Operation Trident, which saw it flown from Hyderabad to Delhi. The unit was also involved in Exercise Brasstacks, which led in 1986/87 to a tense standoff between India and Pakistan, with the first signs of nuclear weaponisation of the Indian subcontinent emerging at the time.[35]

However, despite being renamed, albeit temporarily, the 54th Air Assault Division, the formation proved to be more adept at loading

Table 2: 54th Air Assault Division, Order of Battle during raising, 1985–1987

Element	Subordinate Units
47th Infantry Brigade	
	13th Battalion Jammu and Kashmir Rifles (13 JAKRIF)
	5th Battalion 3rd Gorkha Rifles (5/3 GR)
74th Infantry Brigade	
	4th Battalion Sikh Light Infantry (4 Sikh LI)
	5th Battalion Madras Regiment (5 Madras)
	22nd Battalion Maratha Light Infantry (22 MLI)
91st Infantry Brigade	
	4th Battalion Madras Regiment (4 Madras)
	3rd Battalion Maratha Light Infantry (3 MLI)
	2nd Battalion 5th Gorkha Rifles (Frontier Force; 2/5 GR)
54th Artillery Brigade	
	7th Field Regiment
	141st Field Regiment
	6th Medium Regiment
	278th Medium Regiment
	1889th Light Regiment

and unloading from IAF transport aircraft, as the IAF itself lacked adequate numbers of helicopters to allow for the full division to be deemed an Air Assault Division – about 200 helicopters needing to be allocated for such a task. With only eight helicopter units operating Mi-8s or Mi-17s, this was clearly beyond the IAF's capability, and thus only select company- or battalion-sized formations could be trained in effective heliborne operations.

Nonetheless, as part of Operation Pawan – India's intervention in Sri Lanka – the 54th Air Assault Division was fully deployed with an attached mechanised infantry battalion, a regiment of tanks and an air observation flight with Chetak helicopters. Its order of battle during this time – the formation was the first inducted and was not withdrawn until 20 March 1990 – was as shown in Table 2.[36]

Table 3: 54th Air Assault Division, Divisional Reserves	
10th Battalion Para Commando (10 Para Cdo)	
65th Armoured Regiment	
47th Infantry Brigade	
76th Infantry Brigade	
91st Infantry Brigade	
	5th Battalion Madras Regiment (5 Madras)
	8th Battalion Mahar Regiment (8 Mahar)
	1st Battalion Maratha Light Infantry (1 MLI)

Though it performed with distinction in Sri Lanka, it was rapidly recognised that the formation could not be deemed an Air Assault Division, and as such its title reverted to that of the 54th Infantry Division. However, its saga was to see an unusual twist in 2011, when the formation was converted into a Reorganised Amphibious Formation (RAMFOR), and it is now the Indian Army's division-sized amphibious formation, thereby augmenting the 340th Independent Brigade. It is an interesting curiosity that the 54th Infantry Division was one of the last of India's formations to use the BMP-1 ICV. As a RAMFOR, the division has a substantial mechanised component, with both tanks and BMPs being used by the formation during amphibious operations. As late as 2009, while much of the Army had replaced its BMP-1s with license-built BMP-2s, the 54th Infantry Division still used the BMP-1, though its obsolete AT-3 Sagger ATGMs were replaced by more modern systems.[37]

The 340th Independent Brigade

Until 2011, the Indian Army's sole amphibious formation was the 340th Independent Brigade. The brigade, styled as an Independent Brigade Group (IBG), was given its amphibious role in 1983 and traditionally conducts a series of annual amphibious exercises in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.[38] The brigade has three battalions, usually drawn from the Indian Army's Southern Command, with an attached artillery regiment and armoured units as required. This unit was one of the first inducted into Sri Lanka and remained there for the duration of Operation Pawan.

50th Parachute Brigade (India)

India's Parachute Regiment was the repository of the Indian Army's elite troops. It presently has eight special forces, five airborne, two Territorial Army and one counterinsurgency (Rashtriya Rifles) battalions on its lists. Additional battalions might be raised in time, but right now, the regiment has chosen to maintain this strength. [39]

Plans emerged in the mid-1980s to take the three para commando battalions from the Parachute Regiment and bring them together under an individual specialised organisation, the Special Forces Regiment. However, these plans were abandoned, and they continue to be trained and recruited by the Parachute Regiment and thus must perforce remain part of the Parachute Regiment's order of battle.[40] The total strength of the regiment stood at some 4,500 personnel in the Paratroopers (Airborne), while the Para (SF) included about 1,200 operatives.[41]

Table 4: 50th Parachute Brigade

Components	Notes
2 airborne infantry battalions	
1 parachute field regiment (artillery)	9th and 17th Parachute Field Regiments in rotation
60th Parachute Field Hospital	
411 (Independent) Parachute Field Company	Bombay Sappers
622 Parachute Composite Company	
50th (Independent) Parachute Brigade	ordnance section
50th (Independent) Parachute Brigade Signals Company	
2 (Independent) Parachute Field Workshop Company	electrical and mechanical engineering section
252nd (Parachute) Air Defence Battery	
50th (Independence) Parachute Brigade Provost Section	military police
President's Bodyguard	pathfinder company

The five airborne infantry battalions of the Parachute Regiment rotate to form part of the 50th Para Brigade, alternately serving their field tenures in counterinsurgency operations or high-altitude areas. One of the eight special forces battalions serves in the brigade on rotation. One of the two field artillery regiments (9th Para Field Regiment and 17th Para Field Regiment) also forms part of the brigade, while the other serves out its field tenure on rotation. These artillery regiments are equipped with 105mm LFGs, while a number of BMP-2 ICVs are also available for paradropping operations as part of the regiment. The 252nd AD Battery uses Igla-1M man-portable SAMs. The Parachute Brigade and the Para Special Forces today make extensive use of the IMI Tavor, various Kalashnikov variants, PKM and Negev Machine guns, and have ample ATGM support with Milan, Konkurs and Spike missiles.[42]

It is interesting to note that the 50th Parachute Brigade is something of a hybrid. While Western parachute regiments – most notably the British Paras – are airborne light infantry, the Soviets (and now the Russians) evolved their airborne units as airborne mechanised infantry. The Indian paratroopers were initially organised as light infantry, but with the attachment of BMP-2 ICVs, standard 105mm LFGs and their associated equipment, one may legitimately ask whether some genuflection towards the greater firepower and staying power of mechanised units is being bestowed upon India's Parachute Brigade. The 50th Para Brigade is now a viable rapid-reaction unit with sufficient staying power for regional operations.[43]

The Paras

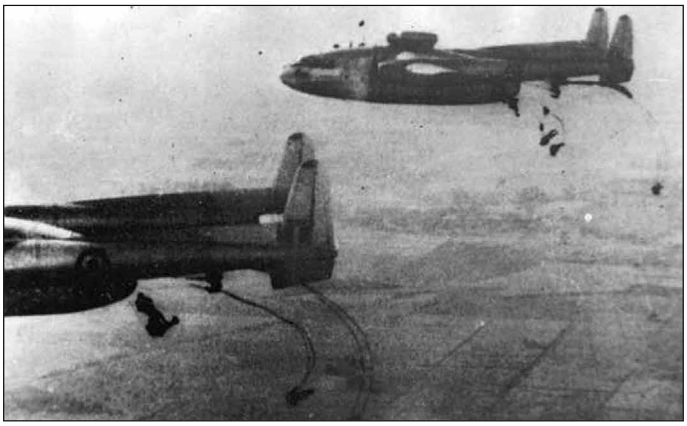
In 1988, however, this was somewhat less certain, as the Parachute Regiment was an amalgam of both special forces units and the parent regiment. The latter had its roots in the Second World War and has had many operations to its credit, including a battalion-level para drop during the 1971 war, and has operated extensively in military operations subsequently, primarily in the counter-terrorist role and as elite infantry.

In the 1948 and 1965 wars, India's paratroopers – for a brief period organised into two brigades, 50th Para Brigade and 51st Para Brigade – were largely used as elite infantry, 1st Para being instrumental in the capture of the Haji Pir Pass, and 2nd, 3rd and 6th Para being responsible for the capture of a series of bridges in the Lahore sector after heavy fighting.[44]

In 1971, however, while several battalions were involved in roles as both elite infantry and as special forces operators, 2nd Para was to make its mark by conducting a full battalion-sized paradrop at Tangail on 11 December to capture the Poongli bridge. This would cut off the Pakistan Army's 93rd Brigade from its lines of retreat to possibly regroup at Dhaka with the rest of the Pakistani defenders of that city. The operation, which remains the largest airborne operation undertaken in South Asia, included the drop not only of infantry, but also of artillery and support equipment.[45]

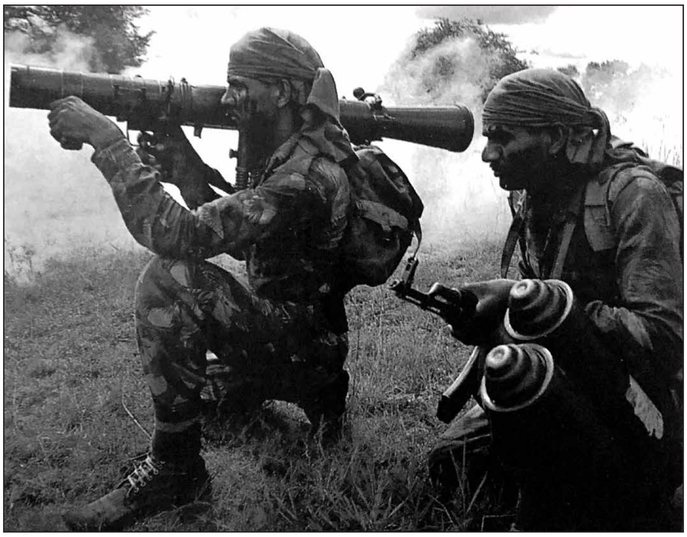
The Paras, following the 1962 war with China and the rush for re-equipment for an expanding army still then largely equipped with Second World War weapons and equipment, found itself being allocated a high priority – just second after the newly raised mountain divisions of the Indian Army – for new weapons and equipment. This saw the replacement of the .303 SMLE rifles and .303 Bren and Vickers machine guns with Ishapore 1A SLRs, L4A4 Brens and FN MAG medium machine guns. The 9mm Sten guns were replaced by new 9mm Sterling carbines, while the 2-inch mortar at platoon level was updated. The 3-inch mortars of the support platoon were replaced by 81mm mortars, while the 6-pdr anti-tank guns were discarded in favour of 106mm M40A1 recoilless rifles.

Led by Lieutenant Colonel K.S. Pannu, 2nd Para was augmented by the 49th Para Field Battery (with 75mm pack howitzers), a platoon of 411 Para Field Company for engineering support, a detachment


A rare photograph from the Tangail drop, showing paratroopers in the process of jumping out of two C-119 Packet transports of the IAF. (IAF)

The Indian Army's paras continued with intensive training al through the 1980s, especially once new aircraft types like the An-32 were introduced to service. This photograph shows a training jump out of one of the Antonovs. (IAF)

A training jump and landing of paratroopers of the 6th Para during an exercise. (IAF)



Troops of the 9th Para during an exercise, with the Swedish-made Carl Gustav rocket launcher. (Indian MOD Release)

कमान्डो
COMMANDO

Paratroopers in a Jonga general purpose/utility vehicle, manufactured in India on the design of the Nissan Patrol P60 4WD. (via Sanjay Badri-Maharaj)

of 50th Para Brigade's signals company, a surgical team from 60 Para Medical Company and a Ground Liaison Section, together with other support elements. The total strength dropped was 27 officers, 25 junior commissioned officers and 734 other ranks.[46] The Indian Air Force effort for this task involved a substantial proportion of that service's transport assets, with An-12s, Dakotas, C-119 Packets and Caribous being involved in providing transport for the assault force. This paradrop was largely successful, though widely dispersed and was partly effective in cutting off the retreat to the north of Pakistan's 93rd Brigade.

The Tangail drop was perhaps the Paras' finest hour, the only time the unit was deployed as a parachute-dropped formation. The force was dropped using 22 C-47/DC-3 Dakotas operating from Kalaikunda, with six An-12s, 20 C-119 Packets and two DHC-4 Caribous operating from Dum Dum airport. While it was intended to complete the drop in a single wave, with the aircraft being launched at 1423 hours, two C-119 Packets departed 20 minutes earlier with a couple of pathfinder teams, one being a reserve team. An elaborate deception operation, employing paradropped dummies, was also used, being deployed from two DHC-4 Caribous.[47]

While the drop was generally exceedingly smooth, one Dakota dropped its load of 19 troops from 49th Para field battery some 11 miles north of the drop zone. Fired upon during their descent, they had to fight their way out to join the battalion, not linking up until 24 hours later. One Packet dropped its load of a howitzer and two jeeps 4 miles south of the drop zone and, owing to Pakistani troops holding out at Tangail, this equipment could only be recovered a day later. Four jeeps landed in ponds that were some 5–7ft deep, and nearly half the battalion supply drop landed in water or in villages but was retrieved by first light on 12 December. Finally, one Packet with 40 troops aboard developed engine trouble en route and had to return to Dum Dum, with these personnel being dropped together with the resupply on 12 December.[48]

The Paras – 1988

In 1988, the Indian Parachute Regiment was at one and the same time both very similar to its current configuration while being very different. In 1988, the Paras were less concerned with special forces and were more of a traditional parachute brigade with airborne light infantry. In 1988, the unit had some seven Para battalions – the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th – as airborne light infantry, a force of jeeps equipped with 106mm M40A1s, and two field regiments – the 9th and 17th Field Regiments – now equipped with Indian-designed 75/24mm pack howitzers. Otherwise, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Paras retained older model weapons. The main rifle was still the 7.62 SLR, while its support weapons were standard issue infantry weapons from the Indian Army's inventory, though experimentation with 5.56mm rifles was undertaken.

The standard parachute was in the main the Indian-manufactured PTR-M parachute, which was derived from the American T-10 parachute. The T-10 was delivered to India as part of the 1951 acquisition of the Fairchild C-119 Packet. The T-10 was used in conjunction with the reserve T-7 parachute. Also procured were the Adjustable Individual Weapon Case, the Container Aerial Delivery A-21 – which was useful for dropping from the doors of the Packet – and the Container Aerial Delivery A-7, which was used for dropping ammunition. For skid-board drops, the Container Corrugated Cardboard was procured. These American systems remained in service for years, and indigenous variants of them were produced for use by the Paras.[49]

The Paras were trained to drop using the PTR-M with their personal weapons – the 7.62mm Ishapore SLR being the main infantry weapon – secured with the Adjustable Individual Weapon Case and a haversack with ammunition and rations. Platoon- and company-level weapons, such as the Carl Gustav recoilless rifle and, to a lesser extent, the 51mm mortar, were also dropped this way. The Paratrooper's Airborne Equipment (PAE) bag carried such items as communication sets and batteries, thus enabling Paras to jump with reasonable equipment levels.[50]

However, while the PTR-M was simple to use, versatile and very reliable – with very few accidents being reported over the decades – and was compatible with use from aircraft as wide ranging as the Dakota, Packet, HS-748 Avro, Caribou and An-32, it was not technically compatible for use from either the An-12 or Il-76. For these aircraft, the much more finicky and troublesome Soviet-origin D-5 parachute was used. The D-5 was introduced with the Il-76 to India in 1984 and created some difficulties for the Paras in adjusting to this newer and arguably less versatile equipment for routine paradrop operations. The D-5 had one very serious limitation – it limited the personal weapons that could be carried in a drop. The jumper fell assisted by a pilot chute. To avoid fouling this pilot chute, nothing protruding above the shoulder or below the knee should be carried. This created serious issues in respect of the long Ishapore SLR, not to mention support weapons like the Carl Gustav. For a considerable period of time, jumps with the D-5 limited the Paras to drops with Sterling submachine carbines which, as pistol calibre, short-range weapons, placed them at a decided disadvantage against reasonably armed adversaries.[51]

The Para Commando Battalions

The Para Commando units were created by the Indian Army in 1966. During the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, a small ad hoc force comprising volunteers from most infantry units operated along and behind enemy lines.[52] The performance of this force proved to the higher authorities that such units had much utility and consequently there was greater emphasis placed on the raising of unconventional forces.[53]

On 1 July 1967, the 10th Para Commando was raised by splitting the 9th Para Commando at Gwalior. The Para Commandos were first deployed in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, with 9th Para Commando capturing a 122mm howitzer battery at Mandhol in Poonch, Jammu and Kashmir. The 10th Para Commando conducted a series of deep penetration raids into Pakistan, with A Group targeting Umarkot and a bridge on the Thar Canal and C Group storming Chachro, Virawah and Nagar. These raids into Pakistan were all successful and were accomplished with few difficulties for the commandos.[54]

The 9th and 10th Para Commando took part in the 1984 Operation Blue Star and were also deployed in Sri Lanka in the 1980s during India's involvement in the civil war, as part of Operation Pawan. They also saw action in Operation Cactus in 1988 in the Maldives and in the 1999 Kargil War. Much focus has been placed on the Para Commandos (now Para SF) units, as these are much more flexible in counterinsurgency and counter-terrorist operations.[55]

In 1988, only the 9th and 10th Para Commando battalions were in operation. These units received some training in HALO (high-altitude, low-opening) operations, as did a select number of paratroopers.[56] However, while they were the first to be issued with night-vision and night-fighting gear, in 1988, this was in acutely short supply. Moreover, while some efforts were being made to equip them with Kalashnikov variants as well as with a limited quantity of Western-origin weapons of 7.62x39mm and 5.56x45mm respectively, the bulk of even these special forces were equipped with standard Indian infantry weapons and their standard rifle was the Ishapore SLR.

The Indian Navy Special Forces – the Indian Marine Special Forces

In 1988, the Indian Marine Special Forces (IMSF) – which would later become the Marine Commando Force and are now known as the MARCOS – were the special forces unit of the Indian Navy. They were specifically created for conducting special operations such as amphibious warfare, close-quarter combat, counter-terrorism, direct action, special reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, hostage rescue, personnel recovery, combat search and rescue, asymmetric warfare, foreign internal defence,

Indian paras in full gear as part of the 1972 Republic Day Parade. (Indian Ministry of Defence)

Troops of the 2nd Para with one of their 106mm M40A1 recoilless rifles mounted on a Jonga jeep. (Photo by Kunal Biswas) counter-proliferation and amphibious reconnaissance, including hydrographic reconnaissance.[57]

The IMSF were (and the MARCOS are) specially organised, trained and equipped for the conduct of special operations in a maritime environment. The unit is capable of operating in three mediums, namely sea, air and land. The core tasks of the IMSF include:[58]

- Conducting clandestine attack against enemy ships, offshore installations and other vital assets behind enemy lines
- Supporting amphibious operations including pre-assault ops
- Conducting unconventional warfare
- Conducting surveillance and recce missions in support of military operations
- Conducting clandestine diving operations
- Conducting hostage rescue operations in a maritime environment

The IMSF has its origins as far back as 1955, when the Indian Navy established its own diving school at Cochin, after sending students to study in England earlier in the 1950s. By the 1960s, two detachments – one at Bombay for the Western Fleet and one at Vishakapatnam for the Eastern Fleet – were established to perform salvage, clearance and underwater demolition. In the latter task, these divers were widely employed during the 1971 war to train Mukti Bahini (Bangladeshi guerrilla resistance) sappers and led several sabotage operations against Pakistani forces.[59]

When the Indian Navy began establishing the IMSF in 1986, its provisional commander, Lieutenant Arvind Singh and another officer completed training with US Navy SEALS. During Operation Pawan, the IMSF was to prove itself to be highly effective and conducted a number of missions to destroy LTTE speedboats and jetties.[60]

The Indian Navy began embarking teams of IMSF personnel aboard some of its surface vessels to conduct boarding operations that might require skills beyond that of armed sailors. This was to prove invaluable during Operation Cactus.

IMSF weapons were largely standard Indian infantry weapons, with widespread use of the license-made Sterling submachine gun and increasing use of Kalashnikov variants. However, their standard rifle, for some time, was the Ishapore SLR. The unit also used commercial-pattern crossbows for silent killing, these in due course being augmented by silenced versions of the MP-5.[61]

India's Intervention Capability in the 1980s: Paratroopers, Commandos and Marine Commandos

India has, since its independence, thus maintained limited but not inconsiderable forces capable of interventions outside the Indian subcontinent. At the core of this capability was and is the Indian Army's 50th Parachute Brigade. This, coupled with enhancements in the 1980s to the Indian Air Force's transport fleet with newer, long-range transports, enabled the 50th Para Brigade to further its reach. The Indian Navy always retained a not insubstantial amphibious capability. This capability, through a mechanised infantry brigade (the 340th Independent Infantry Brigade), was available for use during Operation Cactus, but was not deployed.

The Indian Navy itself was emerging as a major blue-water force in Asia, operating two aircraft carriers with escorts. While lacking a dedicated force of marines, it began the creation of a naval special forces unit which would play an important role in Operation Cactus. Also of note were the Indian Navy's aviation assets in the form of shipborne helicopters and land-based maritime reconnaissance aircraft.

The IPKF

A word about the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) is in order while discussing India's intervention forces. The IPKF was India's largest out-of-country military deployment. It remains to this day a topic of some unease within India owing to the somewhat rushed and ill-conceived deployment of personnel, as well as the unrealistic assumptions upon which its intervention was based.

The IPKF was the Indian military contingent, as part of a broader political objective, and was tasked with performing a major peacekeeping operation in Sri Lanka between 1987 and 1990 in pursuit of a political settlement between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil political forces and insurgents. The IPKF was formed under the aegis of the 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan Accord that aimed to end the Sri Lankan Civil War between the government and heavily armed Sri Lankan Tamil insurgents, most notably the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).[62]

The tasks were assigned as per the terms of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, which was very much the brainchild of then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The impetus for the accord and the IPKF was the escalation of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese-dominated government and the Tamil minority, and a massive influx of Tamil refugees in India. Rajiv Gandhi took, in partnership with a much more reluctant Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayawardene, the step of pushing through the accord and establishing and deploying the IPKF.

The principal objective of the IPKF was to disarm all Tamil insurgent groups, including the LTTE and establish a Tamil police force. The disarming of the insurgent groups was to be followed by the formation of an Interim Administrative Council as expeditiously as possible.

As peacekeepers, the IPKF was not envisaged as being required to engage in combat, and deployment and troop preparation were thus less than ideal due to this degree of naivety on the part of the Indian military and political leadership.

However, within a few months of their arrival, the IPKF, after some limited levels of disarmament by the insurgents, became engaged in heavy combat with the LTTE while trying to enforce the terms of the accord. The LTTE tried to dominate the Interim Administrative Council and refused to disarm. The handing over of weapons was a precondition to the establishment of peace and the enforcement of a political settlement on the island and threatened to wreck the tentative peace accord.[63]

The belligerent attitude on the part of the LTTE led to the group launching a series of attacks on the IPKF and the latter deciding to disarm the LTTE by force. Over a two-year period, while deployed in northern Sri Lanka, the IPKF launched a series of combat operations aimed at destroying the LTTE-led insurgency and taking over its strongholds.

Although it established a level of military dominance in the region at considerable cost, the IPKF never succeeded in eliminating the LTTE. A change in government in India, pressure from Tamil political parties in India as well as an increasing feeling that the effort in Sri Lanka was not worth the cost led to a cooling of Indian enthusiasm for armed involvement in the conflict. This was further complicated by political machinations between a new Sri Lankan government and the LTTE.[64]

The IPKF began its withdrawal from Sri Lanka in 1989, having received new orders from the newly elected government of Prime

Table 5: IPKF order of battle, 1988

Branch & Unit	Elements & Notes
Indian Army	
54th Infantry Division	
	10th Battalion, Para Commandos
	65th Armoured Regiment
	6th Battalion, Brigade of the Guards
91st Infantry Brigade	5th Battalion, Madras Regiment
	8th Battalion, Mahar Regiment
	1st Battalion, Maratha Light Infantry
76th Infantry Brigade	12th Battalion, Garhwal Rifles
	2nd Battalion, Maratha Light Infantry
	25th Battalion, Rajput Regiment
47th Infantry Brigade	11th Battalion, Madras Regiment
	5th Battalion, Maratha Light Infantry
	14th Battalion, Sikh Light Infantry
36th Infantry Division	
115th Infantry Brigade	5th Battalion, 1st Gorkha Rifles
72nd Infantry Brigade	4th Battalion, 5th Gorkha Rifles (Frontier Force)
	13th Battalion, Sikh Light Infantry
41st Infantry Brigade	5th Battalion, Rajputana Rifles
57th Infantry Division	Elements
4th Mountain Division	Elements
Independent Units	340th Infantry Brigade (Amphibious)
	18th Infantry Brigade
	4th Battalion, Mahar Regiment
	12th Battalion, Grenadiers
	5th Battalion, Parachute Regiment
	15th Battalion, Mechanised Infantry Regiment
	25th Battalion, Mechanised Infantry Regiment
	17th Parachute Field Regiment
	831st Light Regiment
	8th Engineer Regiment
	110th Engineer Regiment
Indian Air Force	
No. 33 Squadron	An-32
No. 109 HU	Mi-8T
No. 119 HU	Mi-8T
No. 125 HU	Mi-25
No. 665 AOP Squadron	Chetak & Cheetah

Minister V.P. Singh, who along with Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa revised the terms of the accord, paving the way for the withdrawal. The last IPKF contingents departed Sri Lanka in March 1990 after suffering 1,165 personnel killed in action and 3,009 others wounded – though some suggest as many as 4,500 were wounded. LTTE casualties, while not entirely clear, were also very high, with those killed in action perhaps matching Indian losses.

The IPKF, at its peak, had deployed some 100,000 personnel in four infantry divisions, special forces units, aviation and armour, plus elements of the Indian Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard and the Central Reserve Police Force. The order of battle of forces deployed in Sri Lanka was as listed in Table 5.

Additional support was provided by Indian Navy warships and patrol boats, which were rotated on a regular basis, and 321 Squadron of the Indian Navy with its Chetak helicopters and 310 Squadron of the Indian Navy with its Breguet Alizes, the latter proving particularly effective in destroying LTTE speedboats. The Indian Marine Commando Force was also deployed to considerable effect, especially when considering their very limited numbers at the time. The Indian Navy diverted many of its patrol assets to the Palk Straits to interdict LTTE supplies, with limited results.

The scale of the Indian deployment was aided by the close proximity of Sri Lanka to the Indian mainland, but it nonetheless required a huge logistical effort on the part of the Indian armed forces and even its merchant marine to keep the IPKF supplied with munitions and fuel. The cost to the Indian exchequer was very high and weighed heavily on the minds of India's government elites.

The Lack of a Rapid Reaction Force

As impressive as India's armed forces and their potential intervention capability was on paper, in practice, the armed forces suffered from some significant deficiencies in respect of their ability to respond quickly to situations. The Indian armed forces, then as now, are largely geared towards protecting Indian territory. This inevitably means that units are deployed initially as defensive units and able to be mobilised fully in time to meet any attack that might materialise. India's air force kept fighters on quick reaction alert, and in border areas there were always troops deployed near to or at defensive positions.

However, none of the three Indian armed forces maintained any sort of quick reaction force. Some quick reaction teams were created in insurgency-prone areas, aimed at providing a rapid response to a terrorist incident or to pursue insurgents. At the time, as noted earlier, insurgencies in Punjab, the north-eastern states and Kashmir were severe, and as such, even elite units like the Paras were assigned to protect certain vulnerable points against terrorist strikes. At the same time, India was engaged in Operation Pawan, and little thought had been given to having to deploy troops further afield from India.

There were significant shortcomings that rendered India's power projection capability very limited. The Indian Air Force had only a single squadron of Il-76 long-range transports, and although the An-12 and An-32 fleets were quite capable of long-distance operations, anything too far from the Indian mainland would prove challenging. As of 1988, the Indian Air Force also lacked any in-flight refuelling aircraft, and none of its combat assets, or transports, were equipped with refuelling probes to make use of friendly assets that might have assisted. In addition, the combat fleet was dependent on tactical aircraft with very little reach beyond India's proximity. The exceptions to these were the Jaguars and Mirage 2000s.

The Indian Navy was better placed, with blue-water assets and two operational aircraft carriers. However, even they were handicapped by the lack of an effective marine corps. The IMSF was never intended to serve as anything more than a commando unit, and the reliance on the Army to provide troops for amphibious landings was not always ideal. The Navy had a very limited force of amphibious assault vessels and few logistics assets for out-of-area deployments despite their otherwise significant combat potential and capability with modern vessels.

Rather surprisingly, even the Indian Army never thought in terms of a rapid reaction force for external interventions. Despite the conversion, albeit temporarily, of the 54th Infantry Division to an Air Assault Division, the intention was never to use the formation to do anything other than operate within the subcontinent in the event of conflict with either Pakistan or China. Even the 50th Para Brigade was not envisaged as constituting a rapid reaction force at the time, as no eventuality was foreseen where such a requirement was needed. While any unit was able to be mobilised in the event of war, peacetime deployment in support of Indian interests was not deemed to be a priority.

India's diplomatic and political structure was also not geared up to respond to such contingencies, and while the country did have a cadre of regional experts and very capable diplomatic personnel, the idea of coordinating or facilitating a long-range military response at short notice to a request for help had not entered their calculations. The Indian diplomatic service and the Cabinet led by Rajiv Gandhi had to quite literally make things up as the crisis of November 1988 unfolded, and it is to the credit of all concerned that they were able to achieve commendable results and stage a very successful operation.

The Maldives National Security Service

The Maldives, in 1988, had a single armed force – the National Security Service (NSS) – which functioned as both a police force and an army-type formation and had a strength of under 1,000 personnel at the time. Its origins date to the establishment of the Maldives Police Force in 1972, with a security force known as the National Guard being a part thereof. The National Guard was renamed the National Security Service in 1979 (the designation retained until 2006, when the Maldives National Defence Force was established, separately from the police, which thus emerged as a separate civil-oriented force). The NSS included a small air unit, which – while a reasonably capable force, proving able to help maintain order and protect national interests – had no combat capability as of 1988. A small Coast Guard formed in 1976 had some 250 personnel and was equipped with a target-towing launch left behind by the departing Royal Air Force detachment. The vessel served alongside a 45ft-long Fairey Marine customs launch, bought in 1975. Three ex-Soviet trawlers, each armed with two 25mm guns, were handed over after being seized for illegal fishing. A Cheriton design patrol boat was purchased in 1984 and a 21-metre-long Tracker-type vessel was acquired in 1987.[65]

The Opposition: Maheswaran and The People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE)

PLOTE was one of several organisations fighting at the time for some degree of independence for the Tamil population of Sri Lanka. Its founder, Uma Maheswaran, was a contemporary of the legendary head of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran, and received extensive training in Lebanon and Syria from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).[66] A dispute between Prabhakaran and Maheswaran led to PLOTE being formed as a distinct force from the LTTE. It took little part in the LTTE's campaigns and emerged in the aftermath of the carnage of the Sri Lankan Civil War to be a small, pro-government party led by D. Siddarthan as part of the Tamil National Alliance.[67]

PLOTE's history is a chequered one, and one which is reflective of the changing tides of fortune in the Sri Lankan Tamil insurgent pantheon. The organisation, one of the larger units of Tamil insurgents and well-funded through a series of bank raids, had been weakened by 1983 after being hit with a series of operations by the security forces. However, it staged a major propaganda coup when, on 23 July 1983, it launched a raid to free Tamil prisoners held at the Battlicaloa prison. This gave the group a degree of credibility in the eyes of the Tamil population, one which they would exploit and then squander.[68]

Following the events of Black July, PLOTE, like all Tamil insurgent groups, experienced a flood of enthusiastic young recruits who were all highly motivated, with the spectre of ethnic violence looming large and providing a great incentive for Tamil youths to take up arms. The group drew heavily in respect of its training methods from its Palestinian connections with the PFLP, which provided training to a number of PLOTE cadres. The group also established, thanks to its substantial coffers, a radio station called the *Voice of Tamileelam*, which broadcast propaganda in both Tamil and Sinhalese. It was a Marxist-Maoist entity in ideology and purportedly sought to build a popular base.[69]

Despite having a strength, on paper at least, of between 5,000 and 8,000 members, PLOTE was not a particularly effective group, with the scale of its operations never matching its supposed strength. This led to the inevitable conclusion that the bulk of its members were either non-combatants, not actually armed or trained, or perhaps kept as a 'force in being'. Whatever the case, compared to even smaller groups, PLOTE was not as aggressive in its operations during its existence. This inevitably led to a degree of disenchantment among its members, with the usual issues of camp monotony coming to the fore on occasion.[70]

On 21 October 1984, PLOTE staged its most daring operation when it attacked the Killinochchi Court. As is the custom in some parts of South Asia, licensed firearms belonging to civilians were lodged there, as well as a cache of weapons for issue to security personnel, guards for court prisoners and police personnel assigned to the court. This raid yielded the not inconsiderable arsenal of 72 shotguns and .303 Lee Enfield rifles, which, while dated, were still useful for any insurgent group. Another raid, on 25 April 1985, struck a police station, killing one police officer and looting the stock of weapons there. PLOTE had thus expanded its repertoire from merely conducting bank heists and minor operations to being able to conduct significant raids against defended targets, albeit not against Sri Lankan Army bases. It was able to carry out ambushes and minor raids against targets in Mannar, Vasivilan, Mullaitivu and Point Pedro.[71]

Like many insurgent groups, PLOTE had established significant bases in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where the population, being ethnically Tamil themselves, was very sympathetic to the plight of Sri Lanka's Tamil population. It was in these camps that things began to go drastically wrong for PLOTE, pitting them against both the elected Indian Tamil leadership in Tamil Nadu and the Indian intelligence agency, RAW, which was supporting and training Tamil insurgents. Uma Maheswaran's arrogance and authoritarian nature were to prove fatal for the group and cost them dearly in respect of materiel as well as goodwill, both of which they desperately needed.[72]

Maheswaran fell out with the legendary Indian Tamil Nadu politician Marudur Gopalan Ramachandran (popularly known as MGR). He also alienated the Indian government and military by unaccountably choosing to criticise the Indian Army's role in the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971. Indian support was drastically curtailed and PLOTE subsequently had to turn to purchasing weapons on the black market. A deal with a Taiwanese agent for 1,400 rifles and 300 submachine guns led to the arms cache being seized by Indian customs, and attempts to secure weapons from Palestinian sources were undermined when the Palestinian agent absconded with the money paid for a large arms shipment, hurting PLOTE's finances severely.[73]

Maheswaran, to secure his leadership, turned to torturing his own supporters with a series of purges and executions, thereby decimating the morale and ranks of PLOTE. Mass defections began to cripple the outfit and by 1986, PLOTE was no longer a factor in the Sri Lankan insurgency.[74] Maheswaran was thus isolated, alienated, held in low regard as a leader and in desperate need of funding and support. Into this environment arose Abdullah Luthufee's scheme.

In 1988, a force of some 80 PLOTE insurgents, armed with assault rifles – all of the ubiquitous Kalashnikov types – some support weapons such as machine guns and RPGs, along with, apparently, heavy machine guns, grenades and mortars, was offered the sum of between US$1 million and US$10 million by Maldivian businessman Abdullah Luthufee, who nursed a deep resentment that was bordering on pathological against the Gayoom government in the Maldives.[75] Meeting PLOTE though his business interests in Sri Lanka – he owned a duck farm – he apparently struck a deal with Maheswaran to conduct this overthrow of the Gayoon administration, totally underestimating the response from the international community, especially India, to such an event.

While the specifics of the PLOTE–Luthufee arrangement will be detailed later, it should be noted that the businessman underwent training alongside the PLOTE strike force and was prepared to share in their risks. Yet the PLOTE mercenaries were part of a dying movement, and their motivation and experience had to be tempered by the recent spate of bad luck that had been endured by their movement and the erratic nature of their leader.

PLOTE, like many Sri Lankan Tamil insurgent groups, had a tendency to assume that Indian support was inevitable, and a degree of entitlement had set in. While it is certainly true that Indian support came with its own agenda and was very much a product of its own domestic politics, the concern that Indian Tamils had for their Sri Lankan counterparts was genuine and should not be underestimated. However, as is too often the case, insurgent groups acquired certain levels of delusion, and began assuming that their patrons had infinite levels of patience and would tolerate any sort of conduct. PLOTE learned that it was unwise to alienate Indian support and would fade into oblivion because of it, but not before one last hurrah, albeit in the Maldives and not Sri Lanka.

The PLOTE insurgents were, like most of Sri Lanka's Tamil insurgent groups, armed with a variety of weapons sourced from diverse places. India supplied a large number of assault rifles, machine guns, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and explosives. However, few of these were of Indian origin, with RAW and the Intelligence Bureau deciding to procure weapons on the open market and supply them to the insurgents. This had the result of arming the insurgent groups with an eclectic collection of weapons which, while dominated by Kalashnikov variants, RPD and PKM machine guns and RPG-7 rocket launchers, also included US-origin M16 rifles and even captured G3 rifles from India's 1971 victory over Pakistan. These weapons were augmented by captured Sri Lankan Army armament and that looted from the Sri Lankan police, although in the latter case, the older .303 rifles were mainly issued to second-line troops. The Tamil insurgents were known to be particularly proficient with explosives and were adept at improvising their own weapons, and the LTTE in particular produced some ingenious and very effective heavy mortars and rocket launchers, which they would use to devastating effect against the Sri Lankan security forces.

However, in 1988, as has been noted, PLOTE was a shadow of its once more potent self, abandoned by India's civil and military hierarchy and completely out of favour with RAW. Like other Tamil groups, they would evolve a smuggling network whereby arms were procured on the black market and smuggled into Sri Lanka. While the LTTE were the acknowledged masters of this art, the PLOTE insurgents were also able to establish an effective supply network, although following the loss of Indian support, they often found themselves being duped by more unscrupulous arms dealers.

3

THE ATTACK

Abdullah Luthufee's business interests in Sri Lanka – his duck farm – and his wealth made him an attractive source of potential funds for PLOTE after their relationship with India had been wrecked by Maheswaran's own arrogance. For Luthufee, PLOTE, which had held itself out as a veteran force – having fought the Sri Lankan Army, the IPKF and even the LTTE – could be seen as a group through which he could achieve his ambitions of toppling Gayoom and bringing the Maldives, directly or indirectly, under his control. Whether Luthufee had any clear indication as to what the political future of the Maldives would be remains very unclear, and some have considered that he was a pawn in a larger game.[1]

Luthufee's Gamble

For PLOTE, Luthufee was a most propitious gift. His pathological hatred of Gayoom made him oblivious to the consequences of striking a deal with a Tamil insurgent group with the ideology of Maheswaran's PLOTE, not to mention Maheswaran's own somewhat delusional ambitions. Maheswaran, sensing Luthufee's desperation, seems to have been eyeing, in addition to the money that was paid to the organisation – purportedly some US$10 million – the creation of base facilities and securing effective control of a few islands in the north of the Maldives' archipelago. This would free him from Indian control, establish his own financing through gunrunning, narcotics and gold smuggling, and keep him far from the reach of the Indian and Sri Lankan armed forces as he would have the patronage and protection of a sovereign government.[2]

Maheswaran had some degree of confidence in PLOTE's ability to succeed in overthrowing the Gayoom government. His forces, as noted, had some level of combat experience and his surviving cadres – those who stuck with PLOTE after his purges of the organisation

Uma Maheswaran, the founder of the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). (via Adrien Fontanellaz)

with its attendant torture, murder and mass defections – were loyal to him and his authority. This meant that he could be assured that his forces would conduct operations as he envisioned them and not become creative or be diverted by frolics of their own. For the Maldives, this meant that the NSS would be confronted by a capable force, one which should be able to best them in any serious combat engagement.

Adding to their confidence was the fact that Luthufee, through his own network of connections and tapping into the disaffection with Gayoom's de facto dictatorship, had been assured of and indeed relied upon, the support of a number of former Maldivian military personnel. Among these were the ex-major Abbas Ibrahim and the former corporals Abdulla Shahid, Ahmed Nasir and Umar Jamaal.[3] Given the small size of the NSS and its very limited military capability, plus its diversion for other tasks such as routine policing as well as firefighting, it was envisaged that the removal of Gayoom and the support of some former personnel would encourage the rank and file of the NSS to be either neutral towards or supportive of the coup. In reality, this was to prove sorely mistaken, the support that the former officers promised being largely ephemeral as the NSS was to prove quite tenacious in its resistance against PLOTE.

The Plan

Luthufee and Maheswaran formulated their plans around an attacking force of some 80 PLOTE fighters. These would be armed with the best equipment that PLOTE had, the attackers carrying into action Kalashnikov-type rifles, grenades, light mortars and machine guns – both light and general purpose. One could suggest that the attackers were in effect a rifle company in respect of numbers and firepower, and though they would be severely outnumbered by the NSS security personnel, they would have had the element of surprise plus the advantage of experience and training that should have given them at least an edge over their adversaries.

Luthufee and Maheswaran began their planning in 1987, just as the IPKF was deploying to Sri Lanka and just as the fortunes of PLOTE seemed to be in terminal decline, with the organisation facing the spectre of being an irrelevant appendage or a footnote to a struggle fronted by other organisations such as the LTTE and India's own Sri Lankan Tamil groups. Both individuals, wary of repeating past mistakes, learned lessons from the failed 1980 and 1983 coup attempts. They gambled on staging the attack when Gayoom would not be in the Maldives, thus making the seizure of power much easier. The opportunity for this came when it was disclosed that Gayoom would be visiting New Delhi to commemorate the anniversary of the death of the late Indian prime minister, Indira Gandhi – mother of the then incumbent, Rajiv Gandhi.[4]

From their base of operations in Sri Lanka, the mercenaries would need to travel by sea to the Maldives. This in turn would necessitate an effective and undetected seaborne assault, as the attacking force would be most vulnerable to interception while afloat and relatively defenceless against even the small force of modestly equipped patrol boats operated by the Maldives security agencies. It should be noted that Sri Lankan and Indian naval forces were not deemed to be a major factor in the planning of this aspect of the operation; both forces were, in respect to the Sri Lankan theatre of operations at any rate, focused on maintaining as effective a naval presence as possible between India and Sri Lanka so as to reduce weapons smuggling and the transport of personnel for the LTTE insurgents who were by that time engaged in serious combat with the soldiers of the IPKF.

Once Luthufee and Maheswaran decided upon a seaborne assault, the requisite force was assembled for training at a PLOTE base in Vavuniya in northern Sri Lankia. Luthufee, whatever his motivations or

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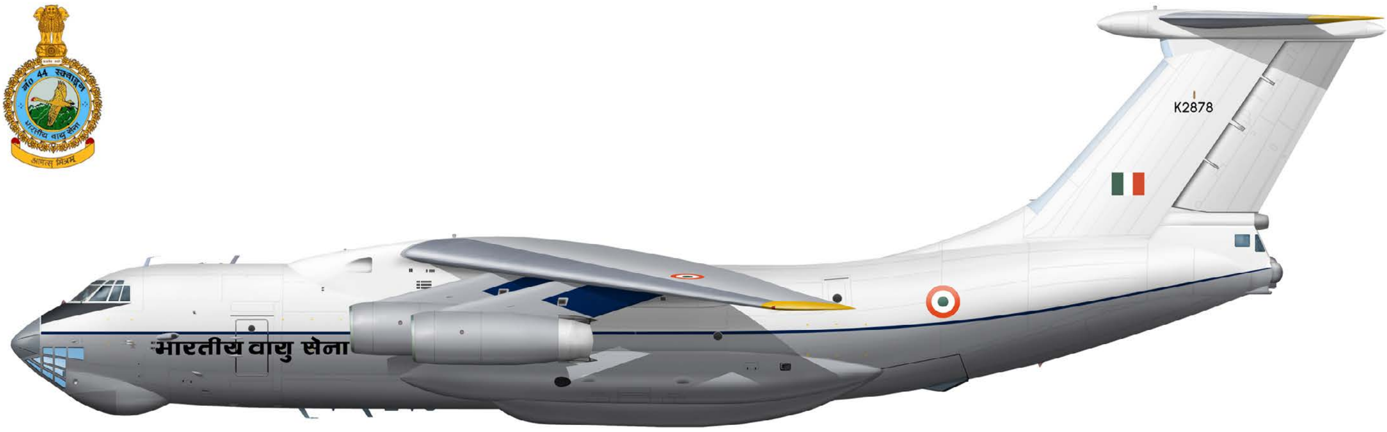
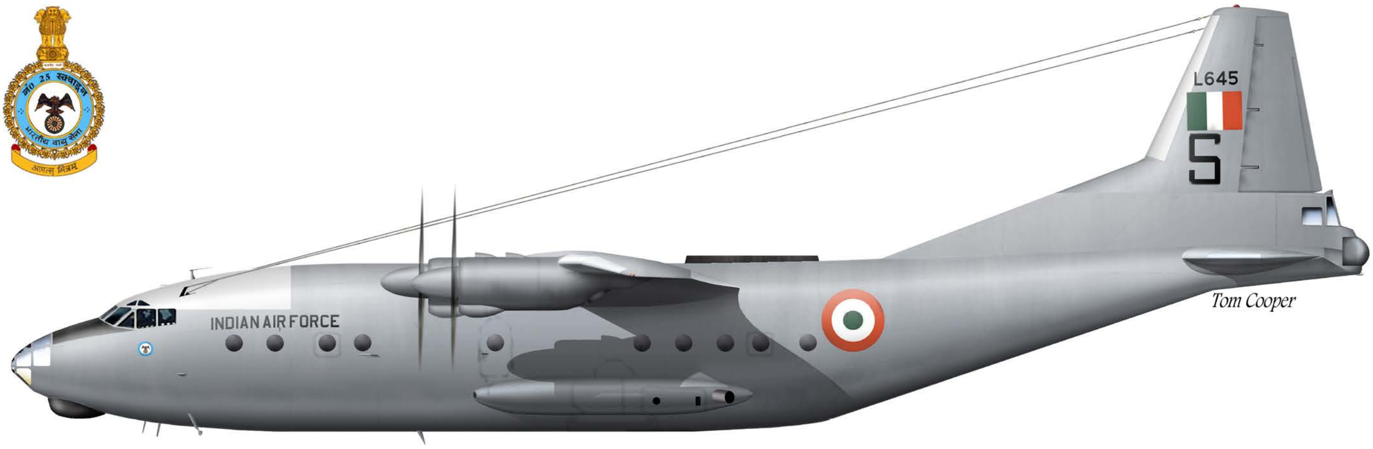
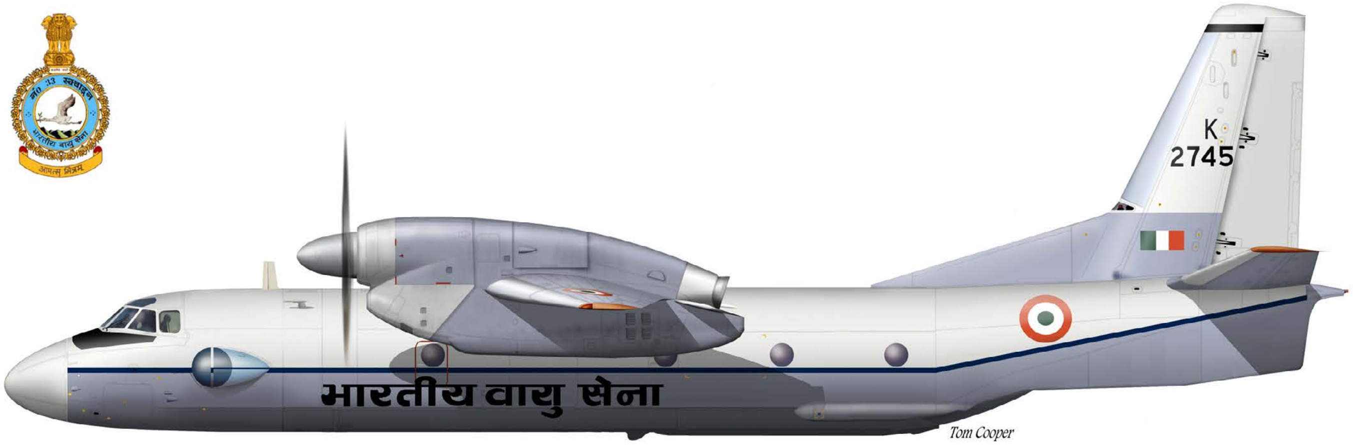
A group of PLOTE militants undergoing training in Sri Lanka in the mid-1980s. Sagar Ahmed Nasir is marked with the number five. (via Adrien Fontanellaz)



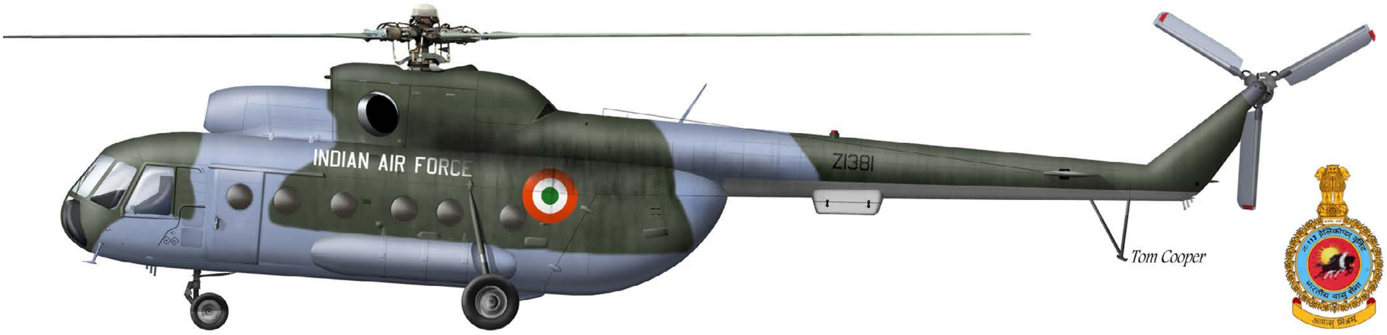
It might appear unusual for a military operation to start with the landing of a vulnerable transport aircraft, but this is exactly what happened in the case of Operation Cactus. Although uncertain about the condition of the runway of Malé International Airport, Group Captain A.G. Bewoor landed his Il-76MD from No. 44 Squadron in pitch darkness around 2200 hours local time on 3 November 1988, effectively opening Operation Cactus. At the time, the IAF had only quite recently acquired 17 such aircraft from the USSR. Locally designated Gajraj, they were assigned to Nos. 25 and 44 Squadrons. All had their top fuselage surfaces painted in white, a thin blue cheat line, and wings, horizontal stabilisers and lower portions of the fuselage painted in grey. Note the application of the service title (Indian Air Force) on the forward fuselage: in Hindi on the port/left and in English on the right/starboard side. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



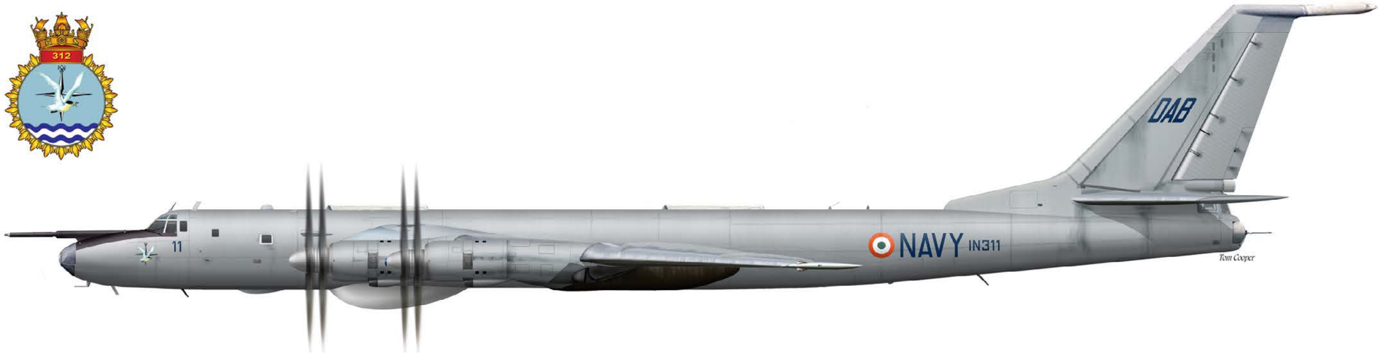
As soon as Malé International Airport was secured, an entire fleet of additional Indian transports flew in reinforcements, heavy weapons, ammunition and supplies. Among them were An-12s from Nos. 25 and 44 Squadrons, all nearing the end of their service but still in great demand and kept operational with the help of No. 3 Base Repair Depot at Chandigarh. By this time, all were painted in grey overall, with the cockpit roof in white. As well as their registrations – applied above the fin flash – they wore large black codes (apparently A to Z) at the base of the fin. Service titles were rarely applied on the IAF's An-12s, but this one received them in English on either side of the forward fuselage. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



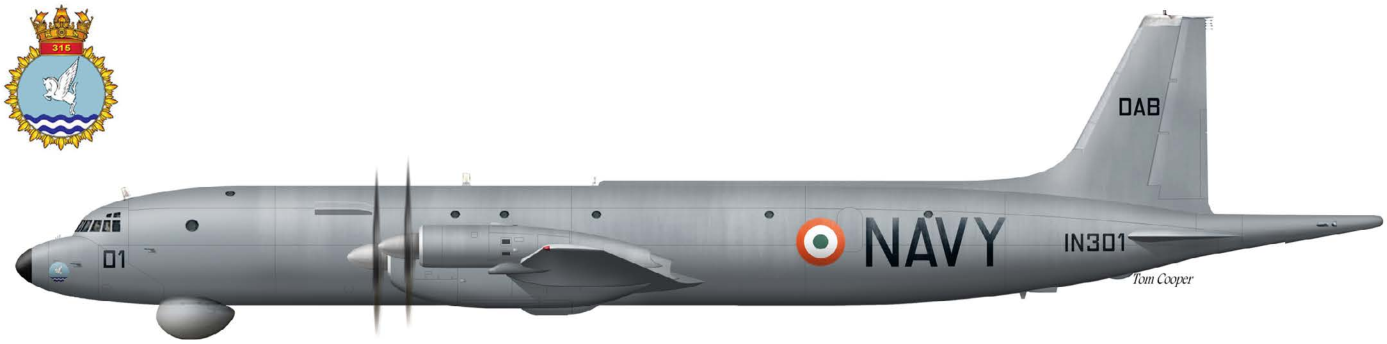
The third transport type deployed by the IAF in support of Operation Cactus was the Antonov An-32, locally designated Sutlej. This type was still quite new in India, but Nos. 12, 33, 43 and 48 Squadrons were working up on it. All received the same livery as the Il-76s, but some of the aircraft lacked their service titles. As far as is known, as of 1988, most had not yet received a single-letter code (apparently A to Z) applied in black behind the cockpit. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



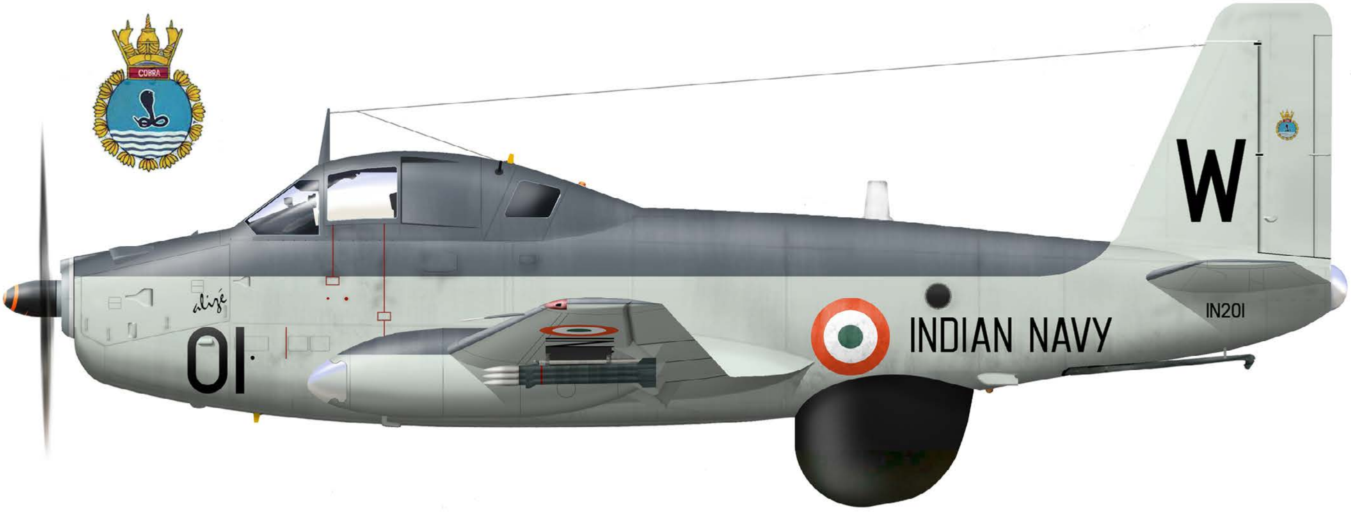
At the same time as the landing of the Il-76s loaded with paras, No. 112 Helicopter Unit of the Indian Air Force received orders to send two Mi-8 helicopters to the Maldives. Launching from Trivandrum at dawn on 4 November 1988, the two Mi-8s – piloted by Wing Commander S.K. Sharma and Flight Commander K.J. Bhat, and carrying that unit's technical officer, Flight Lieutenant Sinha – reached Malé following a hair-raising flight only metres above the wave-tops, despite bad weather. They thus became the only IAF helicopters involved in Operation Cactus. As of 1988, around 100 Mi-8s were in service with at least five helicopter units of the IAF: nearly all were painted as shown here (in blue-grey and dark green on top surfaces and sides) and wore four-digit serials prefixed by Z. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



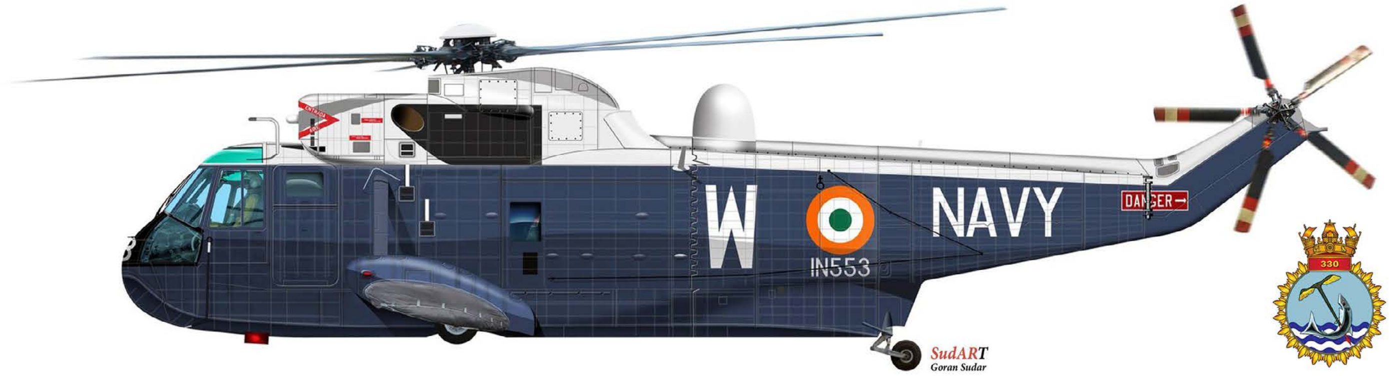
Aircraft and helicopters of the Indian Navy played a crucial role in establishing control over the sea between the southern shores of India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Foremost among these were Tupolev Tu-142MK-Es: the first three out of an eventual eight (all second-hand but overhauled examples) were delivered only in March 1988, and this was thus their first active operation. All the Tu-142MK-Es were operated by Indian Navy Squadron (INAS) 312, the crest of which is shown as an inset, originally based at the Naval Air Station at Dabolim. They were painted in mid-grey overall, but had the leading edges of their wings and horizontal fins, and the spinners, left in bare metal overall. National insignia was applied in six positions: on the rear fuselage this was followed by the service title (in English on the port side and Hindi on the starboard) and the individual serial number, the last two figures of which were repeated below the cockpit. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



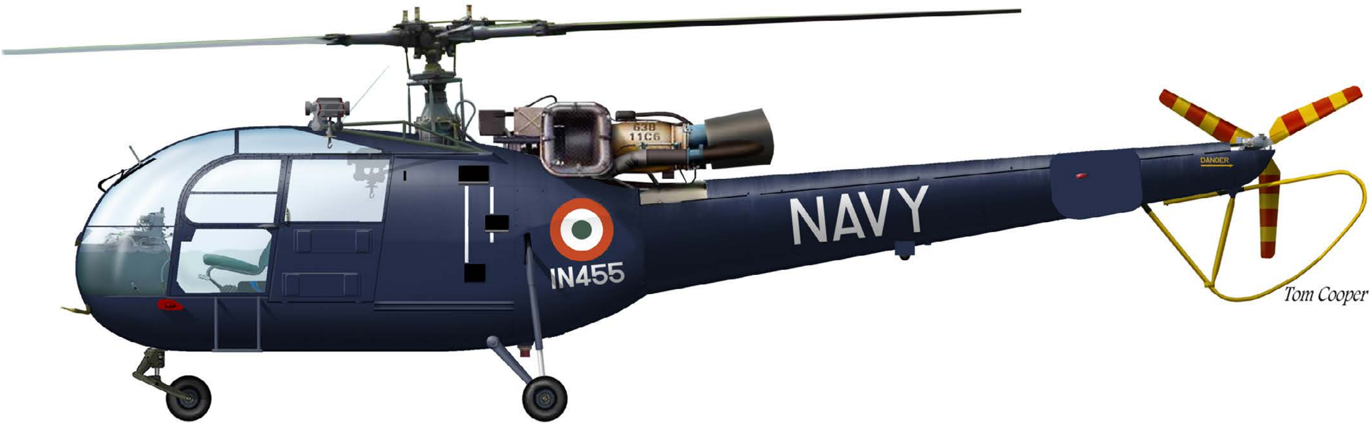
Another maritime patrol aircraft (and anti-submarine aircraft) of Soviet design in service with the Indian Navy as of 1988, and deployed operationally during Operation Cactus, was the Ilyushin Il-38. Three of these were acquired in 1977, with two much-upgraded Il-38SDs following in 1983. The Il-38SD included the installation of the new Sea Dragon avionic suite, new radar, forward-looking infrared turret under the nose, an electronic warfare system and compatibility with British-made Sea Eagle anti-ship missiles. Operated by the Dabolim-based INAS 315, all five were painted in mid-grey overall, wore national markings in six positions, with service titles and serials in black. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



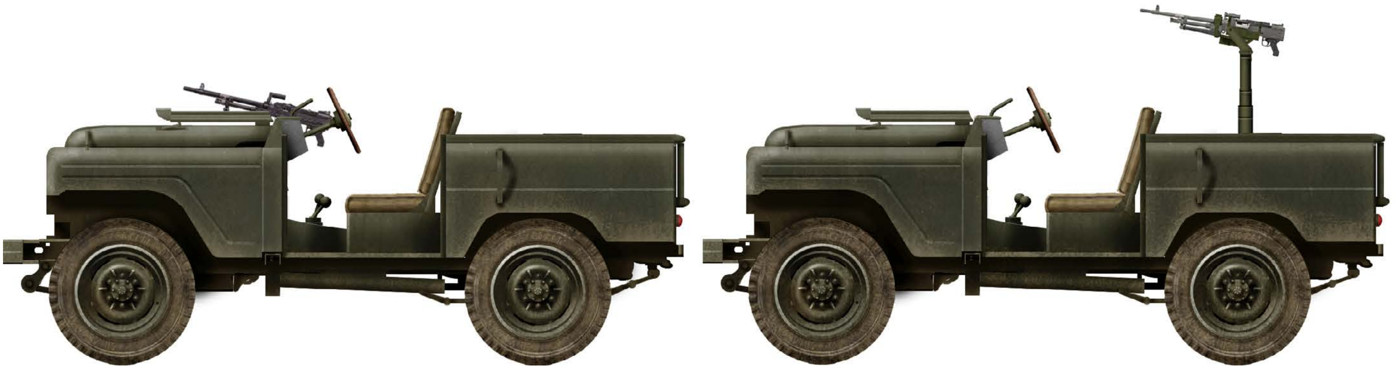
By 1988, relatively few of the 14 Breguet Br.1050 Alizé anti-submarine warfare aircraft acquired and operated by INAS 310 were still fully mission capable. While originally serving aboard INS *Vikrant* (the first aircraft carrier of the Indian Navy), from 1987 they were relegated to shore-based operations and were usually deployed in support of the Indian Peace Keeping Force on Sri Lanka. In that area of operations, they proved highly successful in combating speedboats carrying supplies for the LTTE, initially with up to six (three per wing) 127mm unguided rockets, later with Matra F4 pods for 14 68mm unguided rockets. Camouflage colours of Indian Alizés included extra-dark sea grey on top surfaces and Sky, Type-S, on undersurfaces and sides. National insignia was worn in six positions, with service title (in black) on the rear fuselage, followed by the full serial underneath the horizontal fin (the last two figures of the latter were repeated below the cockpit). A small unit insignia was often applied on the rudder. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



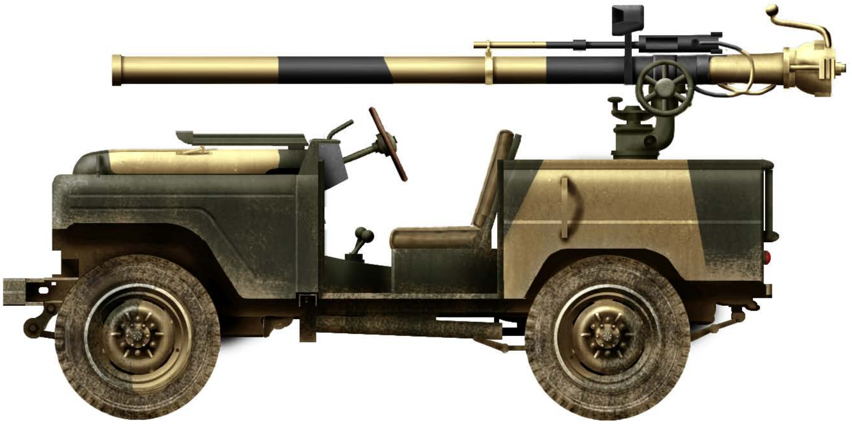
Starting in 1969, India acquired a total of 15 Westland Sea King Mk.42/42A and 20 Sea King Mk.42B anti-submarine helicopters, along with six Sea King Mk.42C SAR and utility helicopters. They were operated by INAS 330 and INAS 336. As of 1988, all were painted as shown here, in white on top surfaces and dark blue everywhere else. National markings and serials were applied on the rear of the fuselage, service titles on the boom and a white 'W' was frequently applied further forward, indicating their frequent deployment aboard INS *Vikrant*. The Sea King Mk.42B variant could be armed with Sea Eagle anti-ship missiles, but during Operation Cactus, no such armament was necessary: instead, Indian Sea Kings were deployed to search for and track ships used by the LTTE. (Artwork by Goran Sudar)



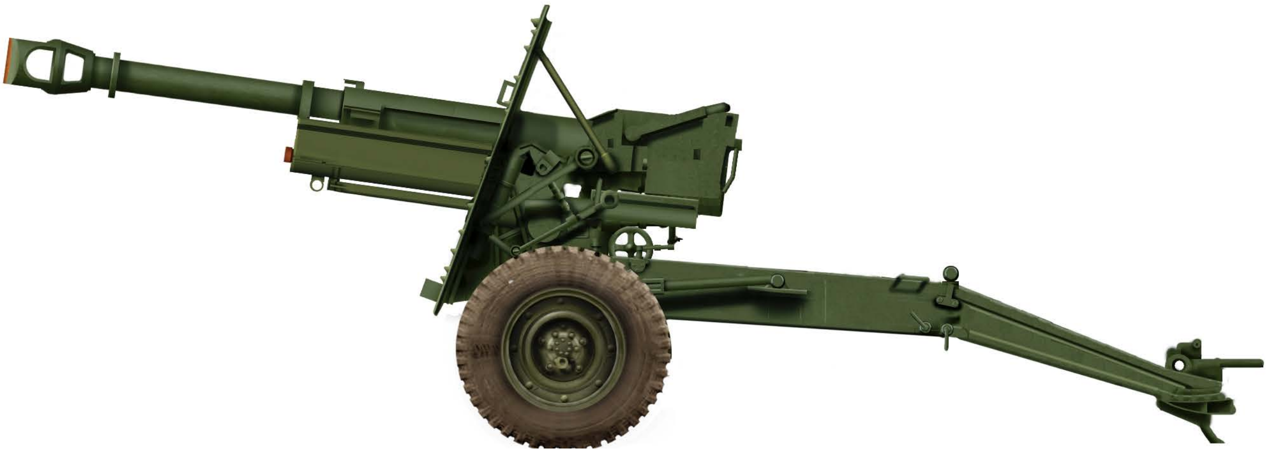
Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) manufactured over 300 Aérospatiale SE.316B/C Alouette III helicopters under licence, under the designation Chetak. The majority of these were acquired by India's armed forces, including the Indian Navy, which equipped the INAS with them. Together with Sea Kings, a handful of these – all operated by INAS 321 – played a crucial role in tracking down and assaulting ships used by the LTTE for its attack on the Maldives. As far as is known, all were painted in dark blue overall, wore national markings and white serials on the rear of the hull, and service titles in white on the boom. Most of INAS 321's Chetaks were equipped with rescue winches but could also be armed with machine guns or torpedoes, and frequently had the left cabin doors removed for easier access. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



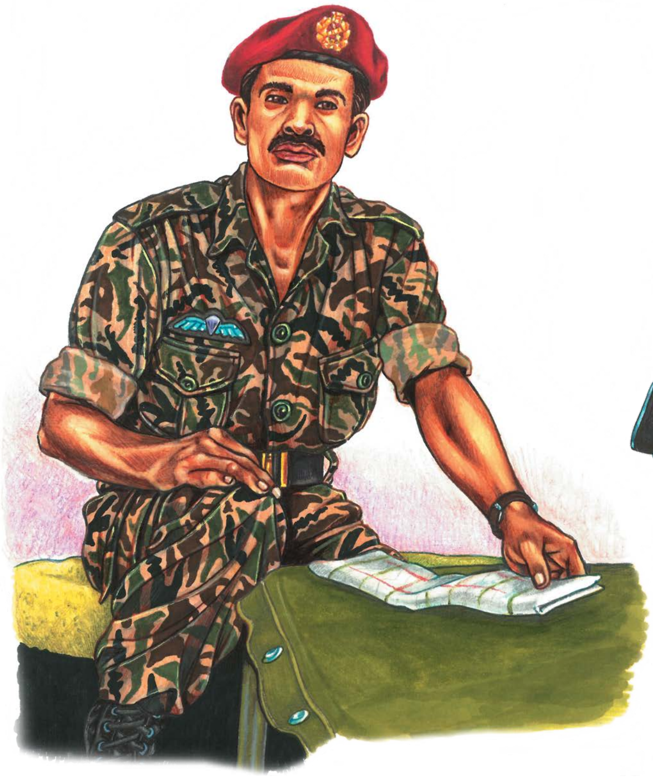
In the early 1960s, the Indian Army acquired 3,500 Nissan Patrol 4WD utility vehicles. These proved so highly popular in service that licenced production of the Nissan Patrol P60 was launched at the Vehicle Factory Jabalpur (VFJ). The acronym for the military division of the VFJ – Jabalpur Ordnance and Gun-carriage Assembly – eventually resulted in the name of the Indian-manufactured version: Jonga. This robust 4WD, powered by a 4.0-litre, in-line six-cylinder 145hp engine, was deployed as a six-man personnel carrier, an ambulance and a reconnaissance and patrol vehicle: the latter two are illustrated here, one with the FN MAG general purpose machine gun installed in front of the co-driver and the other with the same machine gun on a pedestal in the rear. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



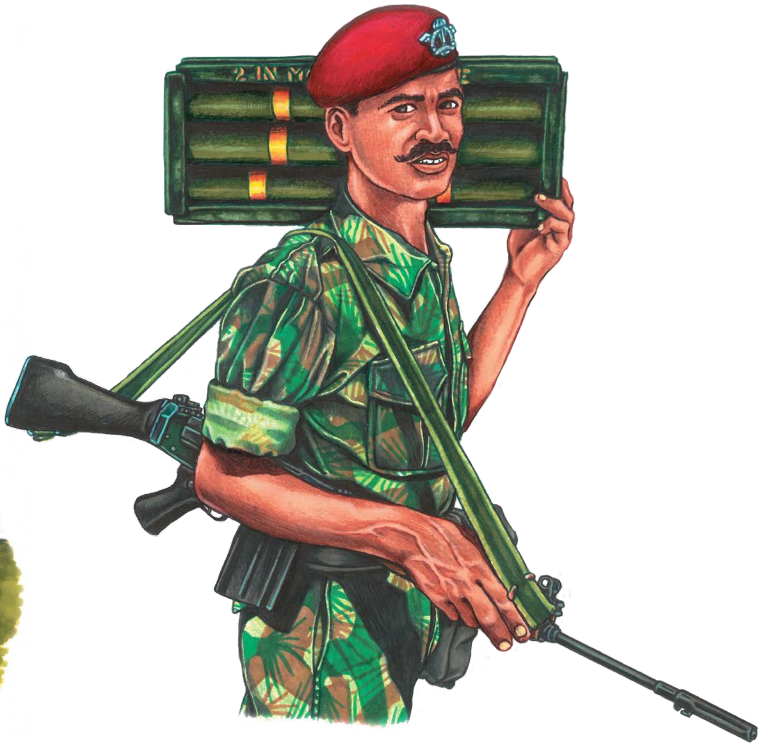
The final role in which the Jonga was deployed by the Indian Army was that of a gun carrier: as such, the vehicle was armed with a single M40 106mm recoilless gun, installed as shown here. The 2nd Para deployed a battery of four gun-carrying Jongas during Operation Cactus. As far as is known, these received a relatively simple camouflage pattern, consisting of wide stripes of sand applied on top of the olive green overall livery. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



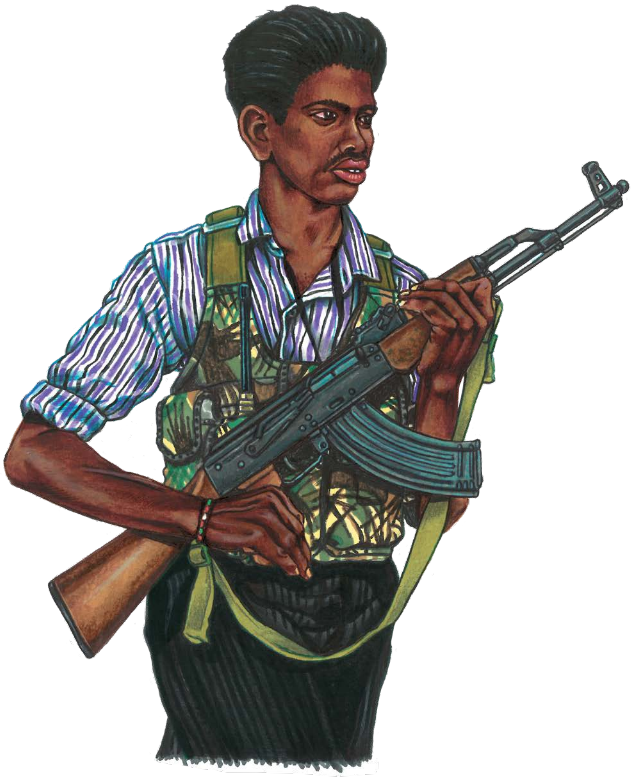
Based on a Canadian design, the 75/24 Pack or Mountain Howitzer was developed in a cooperation between the Armament Research & Development Establishment (ARDE) and Ordnance Factories to become the first indigenously designed and manufactured lightweight howitzer in Indian service. Its nomenclature is based on the calibre; 75mm, with a barrel length of 24 calibre. Although taking a long time to develop, and proving something of an 'underdevelopment', it became highly popular once it entered service, and at least one such battery was deployed during Operation Cactus. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



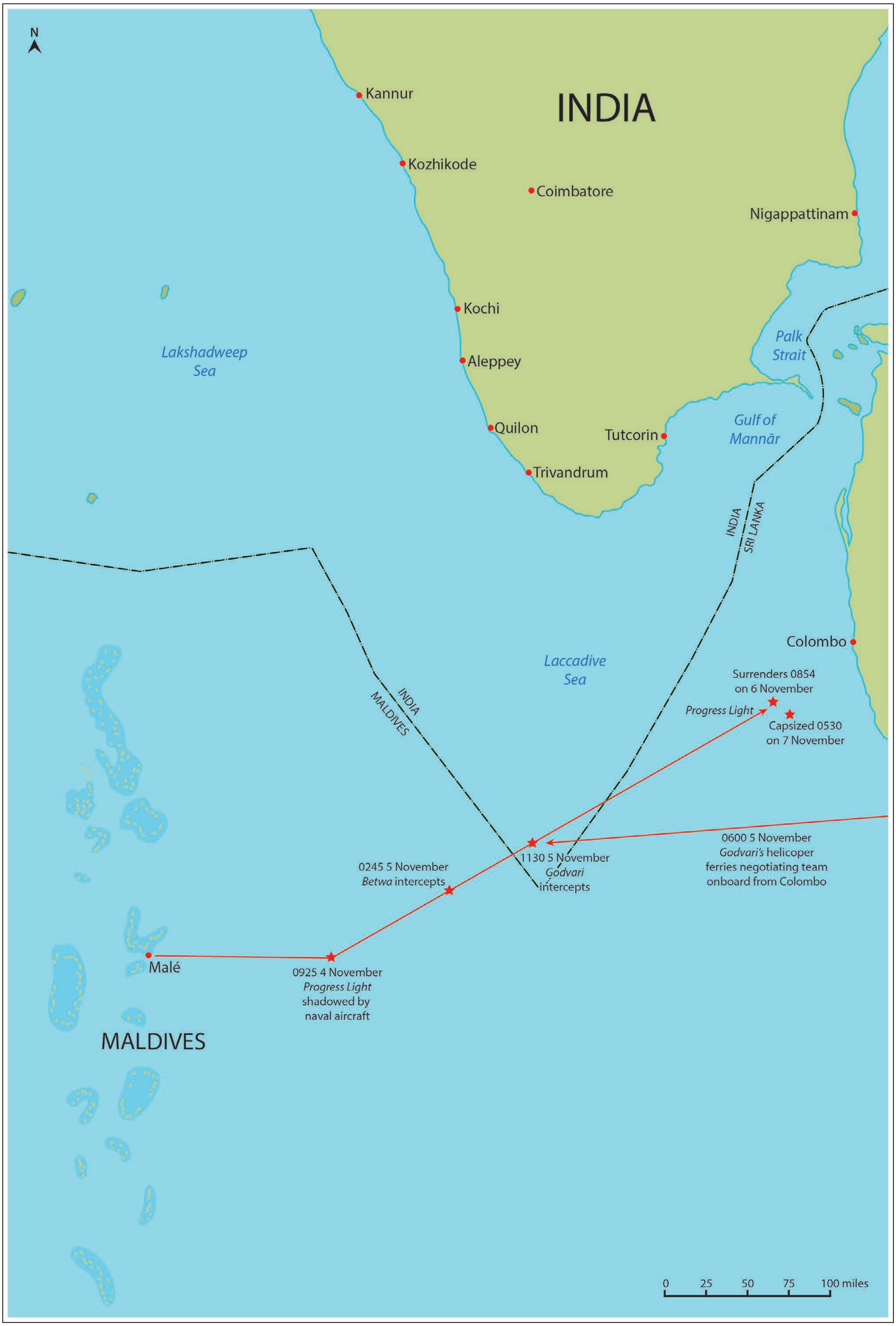
This illustration shows Brigadier F. F. C. Bulsara at Hulhule International during the Indian intervention in the Maldives. He wears a uniform with non-regular pattern, most likely privately purchased. Note the only visible insignia on his fatigues: the parachute wings above the right pocket, identifying him as a qualified paratrooper. His maroon beret has the gold insignia of a senior officer of the Indian Air Force. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



This private of 6 Para Battalion of the Indian Army is shown wearing a maroon beret with the cap badge of the Parachute Regiment and the Indian version of the DPM camouflage uniform. He is armed with the Indian-made version of the SLR 7.62mm assault rifle (magazines for which were carried in a single canvas pouch attached to the Model 1937 belt) and is shown carrying a box of 2-inch mortar bombs on his shoulder. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



In the case of the Tamil guerrilla of 1988, there little to say about 'uniforms': they simply wore common clothes of that time. However, this individual is shown wearing a tactical vest (probably stolen from Indian Army stocks), with various pouches for ammunition magazines and grenades. Notable is the small Motorola radio (just visible behind the breach of the AK assault rifle), used for short-range communication. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)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INDIA
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Nigappattinam
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Tutcorin
Trivandrum
Lakshadweep Sea
Palk Strait
Gulf of Mannār
INDIA
SRI LANKA
Colombo
Laccadive Sea
INDIA
MALDIVES
Surrenders 0854 on 6 November
Progress Light
Capsized 0530 on 7 November
0600 5 November Godvari's helicoper ferries negotiating team onboard from Colombo
1130 5 November Godvari intercepts
0245 5 November Betwa intercepts
Malé
0925 4 November Progress Light shadowed by naval aircraft
MALDIVES
0
25
50
75
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A map of Operation Cactus, in November 1988, depicting the most important operations carried out between India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. (Map by George Anderson) flaws, was very much willing to share the risks of this venture and he undertook training with the PLOTE assault force. Final planning was conducted at a poultry farm outside of Colombo, and the force – including Luthufee, another Maldivian and the 80 men of the PLOTE assault force, led by Maheswaran's hand-picked commander, under the pseudonym of Vasanthi, with a deputy with the alias of Farook – assembled on Mullikulam beach on 29 October 1988 to begin their four-day journey to the Maldives.[5]

A militant of the PLOTE undergoing training with a Soviet-made RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenade launcher at one of LTTE's camps in Sri Lanka in the mid-1980s. (via Adrien Fontanellaz)

Fate's Curious Confluence of Events

Maheswaran, with his enormous ego and belief that his plan was sure to work, failed to inform the PLOTE's politburo and its Central Committee of his decision. His gamble was that the Maldives coup would mark a significant change in fortunes for PLOTE, which, as has been noted, was by 1988 a virtually irrelevant organisation, with little by way of influence in Sri Lanka and declining support among Sri Lanka's Tamils, plus of course abysmal relations with India's Tamil politicians and the Indian political and military establishment. This unilateral action would effectively doom the mission and the military operations of PLOTE. A team of personnel, with assistance from Luthufee, had infiltrated Malé some months in advance to conduct a reconnaissance of the target areas, as well as to provide intelligence for the assault force.[6]

However, the operation had not gone without hitches. An attempt to purchase a ship in France to transport the assault force to the Maldives failed quite comically when the French authorities seized the vessel because the PLOTE purchasing team had failed to pay the insurance for the ship, arising suspicions among the authorities who acted accordingly. To transport the team, PLOTE had to resort to capturing two trawlers from Kalpitiya harbour in Sri Lanka and then installing on them the necessary speed boats for landing the personnel and their associated equipment on the beaches of Malé, as envisaged in Maheswaran's plan.[7] The PLOTE assault force ended up crammed into two small trawlers, each with 40 personnel, their arms and ammunition and limited communications gear. There was no time to customise the vessels.

Yet even with all this planning, and even before the assault force assembled on 29 October, Gayoom made a fateful decision that would effectively doom the operation – he cancelled his visit to India.[8] It is still a matter of some debate as to whether Gayoom had some degree of advanced warning of the likelihood of an attempt to overthrow his government. While initially such reports were dismissed, in a speech to the Maldivian Majlis, Gayoom indicated that an individual by the name of Abdul Majeed Khalid had informed the then defence minister, Ilyas Ibrahim, of the possibility of an armed assault aimed at overthrowing the government, whereupon the Maldives government had taken various precautions, having learned the lessons of the previous coup attempts of 1980 and 1983.[9] The lessons learned ensured that the higher levels of the Maldivian government were apprised of threats to their security. Yet Gayoom's security establishment, as has been seen, was a modest force with limited intelligence assets, and even more limited out-of-area intelligence-gathering capabilities in Sri Lanka.

Set against this, however, is the fact that the Maldivian NSS seemed genuinely taken by surprise at the assault. There was no apparent deployment of additional surveillance assets to protect the coastline, no teams physically patrolling the beaches, and the NSS headquarters in Malé does not seem to have been placed on a higher state of alert. If these considerations are taken into account, it is possible – though this is mere supposition – that Gayoom did receive some level of information that there was the possibility of a move to topple the government, although it is probable that the precise nature of the threat was not specified. It is also not beyond the realms of possibility that Gayoom had some level of suspicion regarding the loyalty of the NSS, and as such was wary of placing all his faith in them by alerting and deploying them in such a manner where a few disloyal elements might just as likely as not allow the assault force to land without opposition.

The Assault

Luthufee, Vasanthi, Farook and the PLOTE assault team departed Sri Lankan shores at 2030 hours local time on 30 October aboard the two trawlers. Their plan was to synchronise their arrival with the planned departure of Gayoom for India.[10] However, as noted, Gayoom had cancelled his visit to New Delhi. Stuck at sea for four full days, Luthufee and the PLOTE assault force were virtually incommunicado, especially with respect to the rest of the world. This meant that they were completely unaware of the radical alteration to their planning.[11] The fact that PLOTE had to rely upon essentially unmodified trawlers, without effective communications with the outside world, was one of the major shortcomings in their planning.

Nonetheless, before 0400 hours on 3 November, the trawlers arrived at Malé. By this time, the PLOTE assault force had nearly exhausted its food and water, and its combatants were thus keen on securing supplies. This sparked a degree of looting in the early hours and the ransacking of several shops.[12] This distraction, while not quite fatal to the mission, would inevitably have had an impact on unit cohesion as well as discipline within the group. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the PLOTE team landed unopposed on the beach and was able to secure its landing zone without difficulties.

The PLOTE team, Luthufee, Vasanthi and Farook landed via speedboats. One boat landed at around 0400 hours at the presidential jetty which was then still under construction, while the other landed at the commercial harbour at 0430 hours.[13] With no opposition to the landings, the PLOTE assault teams were able to assemble unmolested and largely unobserved. The NSS was completely absent from the streets of Malé, and there was neither a challenge to the attackers nor any resistance to their depredations.

A team led by Vasanthi was assigned to seize the NSS base in Malé, where the only armed resistance was to be expected, while a sub-team led by Babu was allotted the task of taking control of the country's radio station and telephone exchange.[14] A second full team was led by Farook, and its task was to take control of the presidential palace and compound as well as the Ministry of Defence, which was expected to be the nodal point from which resistance could be coordinated. Both teams found themselves cut off from each other when the group led by Vasanthi lost its only radio set while disembarking, which ensured that there would be no communication between the two teams and coordination would now be impossible.

A Comedy of Errors

As noted, hunger and thirst led to the PLOTE insurgents embarking upon a minor looting spree in Malé as they sought to satiate hunger as well as indulge in some opportunistic enrichment as the opportunity arose. However, even with this diversion, the assault groups were operating almost completely without opposition until, while the Vasanthi group was assembling near Republic Square, one of the insurgents accidentally discharged his firearm.[15] This alerted NSS personnel, initially acting as policemen, who engaged the insurgents in a brief firefight, though it is still unclear if there was anything more than a derisory exchange of fire.

The Vasanthi group reached NSS headquarters by 0420 hours. At this point they opened fire on the complex and attempted to breach its walls with explosives. NSS sentry Corporal Hussain Adam, when asked about the gunfire, noted that there were persons with weapons moving around and that they were gathering near the headquarters. This alerted the NSS personnel in the compound and they armed themselves, while Corporal Adam and fellow sentry Adam Mohammed started to return fire almost as soon as the insurgents began their attack. NSS sirens from within the compound began to wail, thus alerting not only security personnel but also the citizens of Malé, who awoke to the sounds of gunfire just as the morning call to prayer was being sounded.[16]

At the NSS headquarters, the perimeter wall was breached by the PLOTE team, but they were unable to enter the complex itself. The sole entry and exit point of the complex was put under sustained fire by the PLOTE insurgents, which prevented the NSS personnel from deploying into Malé or organising any sort of counterattack as they were effectively confined to their compound.[17] The insurgents were thus able to besiege the NSS headquarters, though they could not take control of it. The resistance of the NSS personnel was a major stumbling block for the insurgents, who must have realised that the defections therefrom – or at least the tacit support or indifference of the NSS they expected – was not forthcoming.

The siege of the NSS complex also meant that the insurgents were themselves facing a foe which now had time to gather itself and to organise resistance to the attack on their headquarters. While the PLOTE insurgents hurled grenades at the NSS personnel, the NSS troops returned fire and were able to kill Vasanthi. With no communications between the two main teams and with no leader, the coup began to unravel.[18]

The PLOTE insurgents, however, had managed to bring almost all key installations under their control. They had effective control of the harbour and the power grid, and had moved to take control of the television and radio stations. By noon on 3 November, they had virtually taken control of Malé, but had not been able to exploit the infrastructure under their control to their advantage. Rather amusingly, and indicative of the lack of armed resistance away from the NSS headquarters, Luthufee took some time out of the attack to pay a visit to his mother, who was still residing in Malé. There was, however, a rather curious omission in the PLOTE plan – there was no attempt to secure the airport and its runway.[19]

Nonetheless, with the NSS confined and engaged, the team led by Babu was able to reach the building housing the radio station and telephone exchange. However, they were unable to force open the steel gates as their explosives were not powerful enough to breach them.[20] Indeed, those of his personnel who entered the telephone exchange were clearly not even acquainted with the equipment they were tasked to destroy, and their efforts only succeeded in interrupting the exchange's main power supply, with the exchange remaining functional on its undisturbed backup power supply.[21] The utter failure of Babu's team to completely disrupt communications between the Maldives and the outside world was to be fatal to Luthufee's plans and would doom the coup to disaster. It should be noted that the timing of the coup meant that the bulk of Malé's population was effectively witness to the events as they unfolded and would have inevitably been terrified by what they saw.

With the NSS absent from the streets, a rather more sinister event took place, although one which would not, fortunately, end in tragedy. The PLOTE insurgents began, while facing continuing resistance from the besieged NSS personnel, to take advantage of the absence of security personnel on the streets of Malé and started to force the poor owners of fishing boats out of their homes to serve as hostages.[22] The absence of security personnel would have placed grave doubts into the minds of the people of Malé's as to the fate of their country, and with rumours taking root, there was an extremely tense atmosphere.

President Gayoom's bodyguards had meanwhile not been idle, and at the first news of the exchange of fire between the NSS and the PLOTE insurgents, evacuated the president to a safer location. This was none too soon, as the group led by Farook was targeting the two northern gates of the presidential palace of Theemuge.[23] As has been noted, capturing Gayoom was not on their agenda as they had no knowledge that he was still in the country. The Farook group instead had the objective of seizing the compound so as to cement Luthufee's control over the capital and thus the entire country.

Gayoom got out of the palace with First Lady Nasreena Ibrahim, his son, Ghassan, and one of the president's aides, Adam Naeem, leaving through the western gate of Theemuge, accompanied by the presidential bodyguards. They proceeded on foot to the Gulisthaanu house in the Maafannu ward of Malé. From this safe location, Gayoom sought to contact Rajiv Gandhi directly, but in this he was unsuccessful. The president thus delegated the task to Foreign Minister Fathuhullah, who directed the foreign ministry's senior undersecretary, Ibrahim Hussain Zaki, to contact India to formally

Eight soldiers of the NSS killed during the coup attempt of 3 November 1988. The youngest of them, Adam Hussain (top row, second from left), was aged only 19. (via Adrien Fontanellaz)

request military assistance.[24] This he did through the Indian High Commission.

In the meantime, Gayoom put out what amounted to an international SOS for assistance. At 0700 hours, and by now realising that the PLOTE insurgents had failed to secure the communications network, Gayoom began to make appeals to every country that was likely and possibly able to help him. These included Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, the United States, Great Britain and Singapore.[25] In the meantime, he continued to instruct his foreign ministry to pursue assistance from India as a priority, and Zaki's calls and appeals through the Indian High Commission were communicated, with due protocol, to New Delhi with alacrity. Eventually, Zaki was able to establish, via satellite phone, a direct line of communication with Ronendra Sen, joint secretary in the Prime Minister's Office.

The Call for Help

India was not entirely unaware of developments in the Maldives. In the early hours of 3 November, Indian Standard Time, Kuldeep Sahdev, Joint Secretary, Burma, Sri Lanka & Maldives in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, received an overseas telephone call from a panicky member of staff of the Indian High Commission who informed him that there was gunfire in the streets of Malé.[26] Sahdev was very familiar with the Maldives and acutely aware of the possibility of an armed assault succeeding, having knowledge of the 1980 and 1983 attempts. He was also aware of the sudden cancellation of Gayoom's visit to New Delhi and the implications that might have been evident from that. He immediately called Ronendra Sen in the Prime Minister's Office, a former ambassador himself. Sen was then able to mobilise and direct the attention of the prime minister to the events as they unfolded, thereby expediting the decision-making process that was to eventually authorise military action by India.

The Indian High Commissioner to the Maldives, A.K. Banerjee, was in New Delhi at the time and he too received a similarly frantic telephone call from the *charge d'affaires* of the High Commission, who gave more details of the coup and indicated that there was significant loss of life among the citizens of Malé. While initially Banerjee thought that it was a hoax, being unwilling to believe such an event, he recognised the voice of the staff member and realised that it was a real crisis. Banerjee was also informed that the Indian High Commission was in contact with the chief security officer of President Gayoom, Anbaree Sattar. After informing his staff to secure the premises as best as possible, he proceeded to consider the formal request for assistance the Indian High Commission in Malé had received. Banerjee, despite his initial surprise, was also very aware of the cancellation of the visit of President Gayoom to New Delhi. He believed that Gayoom had knowledge of a possible coup attempt and had thus stayed behind in the expectation of trouble.[27]

The presence of Banerjee in New Delhi plus the experience of Sahdev were to prove to be absolutely crucial for the success of Operation Cactus. Sahdev had been closely associated with the 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan accords and had worked on the deployment of the IPKF to Sri Lanka. He had thus built up a level of knowledge regarding the Indian armed forces and their capabilities, plus he had developed a working relationship with key military officers and was able to draw on their expertise as needed. He was concerned that with Gayoom's safety being possibly at risk, a rescue operation would be needed. This was an operation the likes of which India had never undertaken. and would therefore require both expert input as well as meticulous planning.[28]

Sen, on the other hand, had established a line of communication between Zaki and 7 Race Course Road, the official residence of the Prime Minister of India, through the prime minister's personal secretary, Vincent George. A continuous line of communication was kept going for 20 hours between Zaki and George, using a series of code words, including contingencies in the event that Zaki's position was compromised or overrun or if he was placed under duress to pass along false information. This might sound clichéd, but was necessary under the circumstances. In the event, the ad hoc system worked extremely well.[29]

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was out of New Delhi at the time in Patna, Bihar, for the day. Monitoring the situation with Sahdev, the two men decided that the prime minister needed to be informed. They gathered as much information as possible to present him with all possible options, including a military option which would inevitably involve the movement of men and materiel to the Maldives via the air force. Sen and Sahdev thus began speaking to IAF and Indian Army officers.

It is hard to understate the initiative and competence displayed by Sen and Sahdev during the hours following their being apprised of the Maldives coup. Sen spoke to Prime Minister Gandhi in Patna with as much detail as he had. Rajiv Gandhi gave instructions for as much information as possible to be gathered and to convene a meeting of India's Cabinet Committee on Security in the Operations Room of India's Army Headquarters in New Delhi. Sen spoke to the press and Cabinet secretaries, as well as the secretary of RAW, and apprised them of the situation and of the upcoming meeting. At Rajiv Gandhi's request, Sen invited Sahdev to be present at the Operations Room meeting.[30]

Sen's communications with the Chief of Army Staff, General V.N. Sharma, apprised the latter of the situation in the Maldives. Sen, being as yet unaware of the number of attackers, postulated that between 100 and 200 Sri Lankan insurgents were involved and asked about military options.

Sharma, a commensurate professional, took the responsibility of operational planning and called upon the Vice Chief of the Air Staff, N.C. Suri, who was in temporary command of the IAF as the Chief of the Air Staff, O.P. Mehra, was abroad. Sharma and Suri were friends as well as professional colleagues, and this helped the process of coordinating the military's response. Air Vice Marshal Denzil Keelor, the legendary fighter pilot who fought in the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, was placed in charge of planning and Sahdev informed him of the possibility that troops might have to be moved overseas by air.[31]

The stage was thus set for the Indian government and military to prepare the ground work for India's most rapidly planned and executed military intervention to date. Synergy of effort and purpose – not usually traits of either the Indian political or bureaucratic elites – were evident as Operation Cactus took shape.

4

INDIA REACTS

In the twenty-first century, it is easy to underestimate the difficulties that a developing country of more than 30 years ago was facing in respect of basic communications and decision-making. India in 1988 was suffering from a very poor communications network, and since economic liberalisation was still some years away, state media dominated the airwaves. Information thus took time to arrive through open sources, and while the local print media was (and remains) highly dynamic, it did not have the instantaneous ability to transmit news and messages. In respect to mobilisation, India's telecommunications sector was not particularly good and New Delhi's response was facing significant challenges in mobilising necessary resources. Nonetheless, the Indian military, which – as has been noted before – maintained no immediately deployable forces for rapid responses to crisis, was able to muster its assets, obtain political clearance and move to prepare and deploy a combat-ready force to the Maldives. This was due to a fortuitous convergence of political will and excellent support from diplomatic personnel and senior bureaucrats. This was combined with willingness on the part of the Indian military to forgo standard operating procedures, assemble forces as quickly as possible and to deploy them to an unfamiliar territory in the face of anticipated armed resistance.

The Air Force Prepares

It became evident to India's military planners that the only viable option was to airlift or parachute troops into the Maldives in order to secure President Gayoom and neutralise the attacking force. As might have been expected – not least from experiences gained through Operation Pawan – this presented the IAF with substantial challenges. The primary concern of Air Marshal Suri, Vice Chief of the Air Staff, and Group Captain Ashok K. Goel, Joint Director of Operations (Transport), was the availability of transport aircraft. When queried regarding this matter, they were able to offer five Il-76s and 14 An-32s for immediate use, all based at Agra Air Base (AB), while another 16 An-32s at Jorhat AB could be made available within five hours.[1]

Fighter Escorts?

Even if no opposition was expected, Air Vice Marshal Keelor was only too cognizant of the risks of sending unescorted and unarmed transports into hostile airspace. Consequently, he put the Mirage 2000H-equipped No. 7 Squadron at Gwalior AB on alert, to escort the lead transports if necessary. To this end, No. 7 Squadron reacted by deploying four fully armed aircraft, equipped with drop tanks for extended endurance, at Trivandrum airport in southern India, from where they would fly and join the transports. That said, this redeployment required the use of just one Il-76 and one An-32 to move the ground equipment and personnel.[2]

The task of preparing four Mirage 2000s for deployment to Trivandrum for a possible escort mission was the job of Flight Lieutenant R. Nambiar, who would go on to great fame during the Kargil War of 1999. When the orders from Air Vice Marshal Keelor came to position four fully armed and equipped Mirage 2000s to Trivandrum for escort duty, the CO of No.7 Squadron, Wing Commander A.V. Vaidya, was on attachment to Central Air

Four Mirage 2000Hs. Note the so-called 'ferry tanks' under the wings, which carried extra fuel and thus extended the type's endurance over the operational zone. (Indian MOD Release)

A front view of a Mirage 2000H of No. 7 Squadron. The unit was still relatively fresh with the type, but proved perfectly capable of deploying a detachment of four jets to Trivandrum airport in case these were required to escort the vulnerable transports involved in Operation Cactus. (Indian MOD Release)

Command HQ in Allahabad. Therefore, the actual preparation for deployment was carried out by Squadron Leader J.S. Panesar. After briefing the squadron, six aircraft were prepared, two of which were kept as reserve. Each jet was armed with two Matra R.550 Magic Mk.2 air-to-air missiles and a full load of ammunition (120 rounds per gun) for two 30mm DEFA cannons, along with three drop tanks to give the aircraft sufficient range and endurance for a meaningful degree of protection for the lumbering transports and their landing areas.[3] The four pilots assigned for the mission were Squadron Leaders J.S. Panesar and S.S. Dhanda in Kirpan formation (Kirpan 1 and 2 respectively) and Wing Commander A.V. Vaidya (who rushed back from Allahabad) and Flight Lieutenant R. Nambiar (as Battle Axe 1 and 2 respectively). The Kirpan formation departed at 1550 hours, while the Battle Axe pair took off at 1700 hours.[4]

While Southern Air Command did all that was necessary to make use of the aircraft for the escort role, as more intelligence became available, it proved entirely unnecessary to continue with such activities: eventually, no Mirage 2000s were deployed to the Maldives.

Preparations of No. 44 Squadron

Group Captain A.G. Bewoor, CO of No. 44 Squadron at Kheria AB, received orders at 0715 hours from the IAF Operations Room to place three Il-76s on three-hour standby. This would mean that the aircraft should be ready to get airborne within three hours of an operational 'go-ahead' being given.[5] To this end, all personnel within the vicinity of the base, whether on leave or off-duty, were summoned or sent for, and these assembled at the unit HQ as ordered. There was no shortage of crews volunteering for the mission, and Bewoor and his staff were spoilt for choice in deciding crew composition.

However, despite all this activity, the details of the operation or any mission objectives had not yet been disclosed. This was of course unsurprising, as there had been no decision yet taken on the operation, but the IAF would need some basics to plan its operations, especially since neither destination nor environment were known. In the absence of official information, Wing Commander R.V. Kumar learned of the coup in the Maldives through his transistor radio.[6] Switching to the state-run television station, Doordarshan, the personnel of No. 44 Squadron received confirmation of the coup and that India had pledged support for President Gayoom. While there was no word that their destination would be the Maldives, the squadron engineering officer began readying the aircraft for flight. Simultaneously, the aircrew began to plot routes to the Maldives using the Jeppesen Charts that gave navigational and airport information and worked out the necessary waypoints and fuel requirements for any operation.[7]

Getting the aircraft ready presented its own challenges. Not knowing whether there was going to be a paradropping of troops or an airlift was to prove an issue, since an aircraft configured to

A pair of No. 44 Squadron's Il-76MDs. Locally designated Gajraj, the type was to play a dominant role during the opening moves of Operation Cactus. (Indian MOD Release)

Group Captain A.G. Bewoor, commanding officer of the Il-76-equipped No. 44 Squadron in 1988. (Indian MOD Release)

airlift troops in two tiers – called the 'double-deck' mode – is arranged differently to the cabling and other paraphernalia needed to paradrop troops. Therefore, while ground crews prepared the aircraft for operations, the lack of a firm idea as to the nature of their deployment was proving to be of concern. While three aircraft were ready on the tarmac at Agra by 1000 hours local time, the raising of the alert level to a one-hour standby status at 1100 hours did not help in clarifying concerns regarding the configuration of the aircraft needed.[8] Bewoor's three Il-76 aircraft were later joined by 10 An-32 transports which were earmarked for Operation Cactus.[9]

Naval Preparation

The Indian Navy, owing to the sailing time from India to the Maldives (some 36 hours at the least), was not deemed a viable option for transporting troops to the islands. Consequently, initial preparation centred around the IAF and the Indian Army. However, it was quickly appreciated that the Indian Navy would be needed to intercept any external assets that the insurgents were seeking to bring into the Maldives, prevent any escape by the insurgents from the islands as well as to ensure that the insurgents were not able to escape with any hostages or state assets of the Maldives.

With its War Room activated, the Indian Navy passed the responsibility to Flag Officer Commanding in Chief West (FOC-in-C West) K.A.S.Z. Raju, who controlled the assets of India's powerful Western Fleet. Appreciating that this was not a situation that was facing a major naval adversary, the Navy had a degree of flexibility in its choice of assets. This was of importance owing to the Indian Navy's heavy commitments in supporting Operation Pawan and its need to prevent the supply of munitions to the LTTE and the movement of its personnel. Because the Sri Lanka operations were taking up substantial numbers of ships and other assets, the resources that could be committed to Operation Cactus were limited to vessels that could be diverted or spared for operations.

The FOC-in-C West, after examining available assets, gave instructions to Captain H.A. Gokhale, the CO of the ageing Leopard-class frigate INS *Betwa*, which was based at Cochin, to bring the ship to 'immediate notice for motoring'.[10] This meant that the vessel would be readied for sailing and to pursue any operational task it was assigned. All necessary personnel who were ashore were re-embarked, the gyro and cooling systems were switched on, the ammunition, water and food stocks were replenished and the cypher equipment, charts and communications gear checked for serviceability and availability. INS *Betwa*, acting on instructions from Naval HQ, sailed from Cochin at 1620 hours. A Chetak helicopter flew out to meet the ship and was duly embarked to provide the *Betwa* with some degree of organic air support. Although the ship was somewhat old, its 4½-inch guns were deemed to be important for the Maldives operation.

FOC-in-C West appreciated that INS *Betwa* was not sufficient to ensure the success of any naval operation. In recognition of this, the cadet training ship INS *Tir*, which was returning from a visit to the Seychelles and the Maldives, was directed to head back to the Maldives. However, even this ship, being only a lightly armed training vessel, was not adequate. A much more potent asset, in the form of the missile frigate INS *Godavari*, which was at Port Blair in the Andaman Islands on its way back from a visit to Australia, was therefore also directed to sortie for the Maldives.[11]

The naval assets thus earmarked for Operation Cactus were very modest – one missile frigate, one ageing operational/training frigate

A more recent photograph of INS *Ganga*, showing it with one of its Sea King helicopters on the rear deck. (Indian MOD Release)

INS *Tir*, a cadet training ship, that was to play an important role in Operation Cactus. (Indian MOD Release)

and one cadet training ship. Set against this was the fact that INS *Godavari* could embark a small Marine special forces detachment and had two helicopters. INS *Tir*'s complement of cadets meant that the vessel had more than the usual number of rifles and other small arms aboard, while INS *Betwa* with its heavy main guns, its embarked Chetak helicopter and its large crew was a most useful asset for the oceanic constabulary role. The Navy did not deem it necessary to divert either of its two aircraft carriers or any of its other missile destroyers or frigates to the operation. It also did not deploy any of its amphibious assault assets or patrol vessels. This was due to the appreciation that any troop landing would need to come through an airlift as the time needed to assemble an amphibious assault force would be prohibitive, given the circumstances and the exigencies of time facing the Indian authorities, who were still unclear as to the extent of the resistance they would face or the fate of President Gayoom and his Cabinet and family.

The NSG Confusion

While the Indian Air Force was being prepared and the alerts were going out to the Army and Navy, there was a parallel effort that while in hindsight may seem amusing, was symptomatic of a lack of coordination between the Indian Ministries of Defence and Home Affairs. It should also be remembered that the government of India and its military planners were as yet operating in something of an information vacuum. One pressing concern and a possibility that was being given serious consideration was that a hostage rescue operation might need to be staged in order to secure President Gayoom and his family.

Into this possible scenario entered India's elite counterterrorism and hostage rescue force, the National Security Guards (NSG). This force, under the Cabinet Secretariat, is comprised of personnel on secondment from both the Indian armed forces (in its Special Action Group) and the Indian Central Armed Police Forces (for its Special Ranger Group). The Special Action Group is trained and equipped for hostage rescue operations, and at the time had recent experience of conducting such operations after it successfully conducted Operation Black Thunder II in May 1988, whereby it forced the surrender of 200 Sikh terrorists holed-up in the Golden Temple at Amritsar after killing 41 of them.

To this day it is unclear as to who or what agency ordered the NSG to be prepared for an out-of-country deployment, but with remarkable alacrity, the NSG assembled a strike team of 700 personnel and reported to Delhi's airport for airlift. After some confusion, they could not avail themselves of IAF transport and resorted to the use of either commercial aircraft or an aircraft of the Aviation Research Centre (the aviation arm of RAW) and thereby deployed to Nagpur with their equipment long before India's army paratroopers departed from Agra. Thereafter they were airlifted to Trivandrum without logistical support, while the IAF, Army and Navy took complete control of the operation. Eventually, the NSG were recalled to Delhi.[12]

The Ops Room Meeting

General V.N. Sharma, who was in charge of making the necessary military arrangements, had concerns of his own before a meeting in the Army HQ's Ops Room scheduled for 1100 hours on 3 November. He was very concerned about the lack of intelligence and even basic information that might direct his planning in respect of the deployment of troops. Sharma knew nothing about the strength of the insurgents or their armament. He was also particularly concerned about the safety of the runway at Hulhule airport, the state of its air traffic control operations and whether any part of the airport was under the control of the insurgents. This presented more questions than answers for General Sharma, and he sought to address these issues before the Ops Room meeting. In this task he was able to draw on the very able assistance of Ronendra Sen in the Prime Minister's Office, who proved time and again to be extremely proactive and determined to provide the military with every assistance possible, which greatly aided the operation.[13]

Sharma asked Sen to ascertain the state of the airport, and after being informed that the insurgents had not taken control of the complex, he then sought to secure the airport indirectly. Sharma noted that the insurgents on Malé would need to get boats to ferry them across the narrow strait that separated Malé from Hulhule. The fishing communities that populated the coastline of Malé operated a number of small boats called *dhonis*. Sharma asked Sen, who in turn communicated with Zaki to move as many *dhonis* as possible away from Malé to Hulhule. Sharma also envisaged that this move could improve the mobility of Indian troops while simultaneously crippling the ability of the insurgents to seize the airport. In the event, this was done quite easily and worked well.[14]

Unfortunately for Sharma, before the Ops Room meeting, the Vice Chief of Army Staff, Lieutenant General S.F. Rodrigues, had a disturbing conversation with the brigade major of the 50th Parachute Brigade. Simply getting in contact with Major Vinod Bhatia proved to be a challenge, as the telephone lines to Agra were down, requiring the use of the Corps HQ-level signals units. Despite being given a very vague forewarning of an upcoming operation, the CO 50th Parachute Brigade was not immediately available, so Rodrigues had to speak to Major Vinod Bhatia and asked him to have the brigade ready to move by 1200–1230 hours local time for an out-of-area deployment against a well-armed and equipped adversary whose arsenal was suspected to include the full gamut of infantry weapons, RPGs, mortars and even MANPADS, as well as an inventory of explosives. The destination was not specifically named, but was referred to as an 'island'.[15] Following the news broadcast on the radio and television, it was not difficult to see where the brigade was being sent, and Bhatia knew this would present problems.

To Bhatia's credit, despite the inevitable displeasure that he would incur, he told Rodrigues the unvarnished truth about the state of the three Para battalions assigned to the brigade at that time. Owing to fears of a Khalistani terrorist strike on the Central Ordnance Depot, two companies of 6th Para were on guard duty, one company from 3rd Para was guarding Command House in Lucknow, while 7th Para was on an exercise. It would require nearly three days to recall the units.[16]

This meant that the brigade could not assemble a full battalion for immediate deployment in the time specified, but one could be pulled together with some delay. While Rodrigues was displeased, there is no indication that he held Bhatia or his CO responsible, as circumstances were fraught at the time because of internal security challenges. However, of concern to Rodrigues was that, given the pending conference with the prime minister, the lack of a unit available for immediate deployment might reflect poorly upon the Indian Army.

Sharma, on receipt of this report from Rodrigues, opted to try non-standard methods. He asked Lieutenant General V.K. Singh to speak to the Para Brigade HQ and to inform them that while the standard operating procedures were understood, the need was acute. Singh was asked to communicate directly to Brigadier F. Bulsara, CO 50th Para Brigade, to persuade him to pull together a conglomeration of units to make up a battalion, or even just half of a battalion. Bulsara, who had served under Sharma in Sikkim in north-east India, was very amenable to this request but asked that he be excused from attending the Ops Room meeting. Sharma readily agreed to this, and Bulsara was allowed to use whatever means necessary to get a unit ready for deployment in as short a time as possible.[17]

At the 1100 hours meeting, all key personnel from the military and necessary political and bureaucratic personnel attended the Army HQ's Ops Room, either directly or via secure communications. There they were apprised of the basics of the Maldives situation regarding the coup attempt, the resistance being demonstrated by the Maldives NSS and the fact that the insurgents were not in control of either the airport or the nation's communications with the outside world. They were also advised that President Gayoom and his family were in hiding at a safe location.[18]

Brigadier V.P. Malik, using naval charts provided by the Vice Chief of Naval Staff, a town map of Malé and even some tourist photographs, prepared a quick presentation as Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi arrived, accompanied by Sen and Sahdev.[19] Gandhi's grasp of the situation was immediate and the discussion quickly shifted as to whether there should be a commitment of Indian forces to save the Maldives government and Gayoom in particular. A.K. Banerjee, the High Commissioner to the Maldives, was emphatic that this was necessary.

Despite the possibility that Indian troops would arrive too late, all at the meeting were convinced of the need to send them. The discussions then shifted to the practical considerations of such a deployment, with the Indian Army and IAF taking the lead, ably assisted by Banerjee's extensive knowledge of the Maldives.[20]

Prime Minister Gandhi, who prior to his ascension and despite his family pedigree had been a serving airline pilot, suggested information be sought from pilots of Indian Airlines and Air India who were regularly operating between India and the Maldives. This at least would provide a better understanding of the geography of Hulhule airport and the situation of its air traffic control tower and other key installations. Furthermore, it was hoped to glean some idea of the topography of Malé as seen from the air in the event that the IAF had to paradrop troops into the combat zone. The preferred option of air landing troops and their equipment would depend on the security of Hulhule airport.[21]

There were two open spaces that were considered for paradrop zones. One was a football ground of some 12,000 square metres and the other was a piece of reclaimed land on a coral reef of some 17,500 square metres. As nobody at the conference was a paratrooper, Brigadier Vivek Sapatnekar, former CO of 50th Para Brigade, was summoned to the Ops Room. After examining the scanty maps and charts available, Sapatnekar was of the view that there was no place for a tactical paradrop of a force, even one as small as 30 men, either around or on the runway at Hulhule.[22] Further concerns were voiced over the strong winds, the effect they would have on parachutes and whether this would compel the aircraft to fly over the sea, with the prospect that paratroopers and their stores would land in the sea.[23] During the daytime this would be dangerous; at night, it would be terrifying. This sobering prospect caused any thoughts to place a paradrop on the backburner as the Indian government, wary of the impact of a military fiasco, moved towards a military airlift of troops to Hulhule, together with supporting equipment in the event of the troops facing armed opposition.

With the available airlift resources being limited to three Il-76 and 10 An-32s, the meeting decided that the three Il-76s would attempt to airland the paratroops at Hulhule. They would secure the airport and then move into Malé. However, in the event that this proved impossible, the aircraft and their troops would return to Trivandrum. The following morning, a force of An-32s would attempt to drop a company group of 120–140 men to secure the airfield or the football stadium.[24] This force would then open the route for the rest of a full battalion of paratroopers to be airlanded.

Major Bhatia, later a lieutenant general, noted that the two plans were as follows:

> **Operation Cactus Plan A**
> Plan A for Operation Cactus was to launch an airborne assault with 60 paratroopers from one Il-76 at Hulhule airfield, to capture and secure the airfield. The remaining paratroopers in that Il-76 aircraft were then to be landed, followed by troops from the follow-up Il-76 aircraft. Thereafter, the troops were to move to Malé to rescue the president by capturing and commandeering local boats. The limit of 60 paratroopers was dictated by the availability of packed parachutes with the Air Force on that particular day and time.
>
> **Operation Cactus Plan B**
> Plan B for Operation Cactus involved a landing at the Hulhule airfield. The decision as to which plan was to be implemented was to be taken by Brigadier Bulsara, once the aircraft was over Hulhule airfield or when nearing the Maldives. Flying the two aircraft were Group Captain (later Air Marshal) A.K. Goel and Group Captain A.G. Bewoor, the Commanding Officer of No. 44 Squadron.[25]

There was a minor impetus to India's action when the US Ambassador to India, Mr John Gunther Dean, called India's Foreign Secretary, K.P.S. Menon, to inquire whether India was going to do anything about the Maldives. He conveyed an American willingness to assist but noted that the nearest US assets would take 48–72 hours to reach the Maldives. India gave some indications of its plans and then moved to execute them, with the Ops Room meeting ending at 1300 hours.[26] The Indian military thereafter moved to issue the necessary orders to give effect to the decision.

Cactus Takes Shape

Following the meeting, Brigadier Malik and Group Captain Goel were dispatched to Agra to convey the necessary orders to 50th Para Brigade and No. 44 Squadron, with the additional instruction that Malik was to accompany the paratroopers all the way to Hulhule, where he would act as liaison with New Delhi. Further instructions, if any, were to be communicated en route to the Maldives through air traffic control at Trivandrum airport. Accompanied by Major A. Kumar, the officers carried a motley assortment of photocopied naval charts and tourist photographs, reflecting the appalling lack of cartographic resources available for the operation.[27] While formal orders had already been sent to the HQ of 50th Para Brigade, the party dispatched from Delhi was to deliver a more thorough briefing, as the intervention was going to be one of the more ambitious ventures undertaken by the brigade and the lack of preparation and local knowledge would be major factors in determining the success or failure of the operation. To this end, their task required some additional support from a surprising source.

A.K. Banerjee, India's High Commissioner to the Maldives and the most knowledgeable person in the Ops Room meeting about anything relating to the islands, suddenly found himself facing an interesting request. Major General Raghavan, realising the need for additional information and the necessity for 50th Para Brigade to be as well informed as possible, requested Foreign Secretary K.P.S. Menon to allow Banerjee to accompany the officers to Agra. Despite some reservations, Banerjee accompanied the officers, who took him to Delhi airport and an An-32 aircraft took the party to Agra, where the preparations for the deployment of 50th Para Brigade were in full swing.[28]

50th Para Brigade's Preparations

While the Indian Air Force managed to quickly muster its assets for the operation, the preparations of the 50th Para Brigade were bedevilled by a series of unfortunate events. As noted, Major Bhatia had to inform Lieutenant General Rodrigues of the problems facing the three battalions attached to the brigade, with 7th Para on exercise, 6th Para guarding the Central Ordnance Depot and 3rd Para guarding the Command HQ in Lucknow. Bhatia, after his conversation with Rodrigues, began to issue orders for a general

A rear view of an Il-76MD of the Indian Air Force in the process of embarking paratroopers. (Indian MOD Release) recall of all personnel from the three battalions in the hope that a single full battalion could be constituted. He sought assistance from Agra's hotels for maps and brochures about the Maldives.[29]

Bhatia was concerned about being unable to meet the request for a battalion group to be ready to emplane by 1230 hours, never mind Rodrigues' additional request that the entire brigade, minus the emplaned battalion group, be ready to move to the Maldives on the night of 3 November and early morning of 4 November. This was especially so given that the initial appreciation indicated the opposition would be in company-plus strength and armed with the full range of small arms, rocket launchers and even MANPADS. To meet this threat, Bhatia was faced with a request that he simply could not meet in the available time. He noted that the request included the following:

- The full brigade was to move to the Maldives
- One battalion group was to emplane by 1230 hours (i.e. in less than two hours)
- The brigade less one battalion group was to move to the Maldives on the night of 3/4 November
- Preparations be made for an airborne assault on an island, with a paradrop planned on a beach
- The enemy was equipped with small arms, rocket launchers, mortars and general purpose machine guns (GPMGs)
- There was no air defence, though the enemy may have possessed some surface-to-air missiles
- The air effort allotted was three Il-76 and 10 An-32 aircraft
- First and second-line ammunition was to be carried[30]

Recognising the challenges before him, Bhatia informed the brigade CO, Brigadier F. Bulsara, who appreciated the problem. His own personal relationship with General Sharma helped ease the tensions that had built, but he faced very real practical issues, not the least of which was that he had no knowledge of the Maldives as there were no military maps of the region.

Captain Harjinder Singh had produced a school atlas and Bhatia's scrounging of the hotels produced a mix of postcards and brochures. An unexpectedly useful resource was that provided by Major Harkirat Singh, who brought a glossy picture book on the Maldives that his father had given to him. It was this bizarre mix of photocopied naval charts, postcards, a school atlas, tourist maps and photographs that provided the material for the final briefing held at No. 44 Squadron.[31]

In the meantime, Bhatia had to find some troops. His frantic recall of 7th Para from Rajasthan was not going to provide troops in time. His calls to the Central Ordnance Depot to release 6th Para from duty met with resistance from the deputy commandant of the depot, who was understandably concerned about the risks to his installation.

The replacement troops of 10th Guards Battalion could not reach the Central Ordnance Depot until the next morning, and Bhatia had to resort to some unusual tactics by effectively threatening the deputy commandant that 6th Para would use force to get out of the depot and return to their unit to carry out their new orders. The threat had the desired effect but was symptomatic of the challenges of circumstance that prevailed at the time and the extreme measures that had to be taken to pull forces together for deployment.[32]

Engineering Support

With 6th Para being the infantry battalion earmarked for emplaning, the support units for the intervention force were still to be decided. Concerns regarding the geography and logistical challenges facing the brigade once it arrived in the Maldives meant that engineering support would be necessary. The brigade's engineering unit, 411 Para Field Engineer Company, was thus tasked with accompanying 6th Para to the Maldives, with a field platoon consisting of one JCO (Junior Commissioned Officer) and 41 other ranks, led by Major Babayya, assembled together with weapons and their ammunition, explosives, mine-detection equipment and reconnaissance and assault boats.[33] The 411 Para Field Engineers were also told there was a possibility that they would need to be paradropped into action as part of the proposed company group drop, so there was a need for parachutes capable of being deployed from An-32 aircraft. All available pre-packed D-5 parachutes – only 65 in total – were therefore prepared for use.[34]

Artillery

Given the dearth of information on the strength and weaponry available to the insurgents and knowing that the Maldivian NSS was very lightly armed, the 50th Parachute Brigade was concerned at the lack of heavy equipment available to them. To this end, considerable priority was given to deploying the 17th Para Field Regiment and its 75mm (75/24) pack howitzers, which were then the 50th Para Brigade's assigned artillery regiment. While 6th Para sought to pull itself together as a coherent force, the 17th Para Field Regiment was being placed on alert to prepare its guns and first-line ammunition for an emergency overseas deployment via air transport.

On 3 November, the 17th Para Field Regiment was observing an 'Administration Day', which was a day of stand-down from normal routine following the commemoration of Zojila Day, celebrating the unit's action in the recapture of Zojila Pass from Pakistani troops in 1948. This meant that fewer than 30 percent of unit personnel were on hand, with the rest being dispersed all around the regiment's surrounding compounds and areas. Bhatia requested that the CO of 17th Para Field Regiment and his second-in-command report with alacrity to the Para Brigade HQ and the Regimental HQ respectively. They left the administrative meetings they were attending and hustled to their respective HQs, where they received some inkling of their task.[35]

As was the case with all other units involved, instructions were extremely vague. All that was ordered was that the unit prepare its guns, first-line ammunition and personnel for an airborne operation, with the troops to also carry their personal weapons and first-line ammunition. No further details were forthcoming, to the extent that the regiment did not know its destination or whether there would be a paradrop or a secure landing zone, or even whether it would need cold-weather clothing.

The regiment's CO, Lieutenant Colonel K.K.K. Singh, met with Brigadier Bulsara and was informed that the destination was the Maldives. Lieutenant Colonel Singh was asked not to divulge the destination to his men until a later date, and he received no idea as to the number of guns he would be required to take. At this time, Brigadier Bulsara requested permission to take one battery of six 75/24 pack howitzers, but initially received authorisation for only four guns, though six would eventually be landed in two troops of three. This did not prove to be any complication for the regiment, being done without trouble and within a short time period.[36]

Personnel, however, did prove to be a challenge. Lieutenant Colonel Singh summoned all his battery commanders and ordered them to prepare their guns and to collect their first-line artillery ammunition at Agra Fort's Ordnance Depot. While teams were sent to collect the ammunition and guns, personnel had to be obtained by

Paratroopers with two 75/24 pack howitzers while preparing to embark on one of the An-12s for deployment to the Maldives. (Indian MOD Release)

more prosaic means. With Indian telephonic communications being erratic and not always available, dispatch riders on motorcycles and bicycles were sent around to recall the regiment's personnel, while the unit's kitchen was asked to prepare packed food for two batteries worth of personnel for 48 hours on a man-pack basis.[37]

Two batteries – 49th and 51st Battery – were nominated for deployment with a total of 100 personnel, one troop of three howitzers from each battery to be deployed. While the normal strength of a battery was six guns, the exigencies involved a mixing of personnel from both units – 42 from 49th Battery and 25 from 51st Battery. Their guns were already in a state of readiness, with the 75/24 pack howitzers requiring no preparation, and the units were ready to move relatively quickly, though all their first-line ammunition had not arrived in time for the first wave of embarkation.[38]

Transport, on the other hand, was in a very poor state of readiness. Of the unit's seven 3-ton trucks, four had been sent to Bharatpur, and 80 percent of its 1-ton vehicles were under repair for an inspection. The three available 3-ton trucks were sent to collect its first-line ammunition and, with the assistance of the battery personnel, they loaded all the ammunition onto the vehicles and thereafter onto the waiting transport aircraft. This was recognised as a major feat, being accomplished in a very limited time and despite the constraints of available resources.

At the briefing held at No. 44 Squadron, the 17th Para Field Regiment was finally informed as to the arrangements that were made for its deployment. They were told that six howitzers, four jeeps and the equivalent of three batteries worth of manpower would move, with loading due to start at 1930 hours.[39] They were not quite sure as to the tasks the guns would fulfil, but they were finally informed of their destination – Malé in the Maldives – and of the attempted coup. Concerns, however, were still raised about the possibility of a paradrop and the extreme risks that this would entail in an unknown region for which no prior intelligence had been gathered.

The personnel of 17th Para Field Regiment were informed that they would be allocated two Il-76 aircraft for their guns and ammunition. This meant that 15.5 tonnes of first-line ammunition with the 42 personnel of 49th Battery and 25 personnel of 51th Battery would be joined by three 75/24 pack howitzers, while the second-in-command's jeep was also loaded.[40] The aircraft were then packed with personnel and equipment from other units so as to make use of all available space on the first-wave aircraft.

With the An-32 and Il-76 still being relatively new in service with the IAF, the paras involved in Operation Cactus had relatively little experience in jumping out of them or doing so with the help of Soviet-made D-5 parachutes. It was only after the experience from the intervention in the Maldives that related large-scale exercises were undertaken – like the one during which this photograph was taken. (Indian MOD Release)

Paradrop Concerns

While 6th Para was being mobilised and 7th Para being recalled, 3rd Para's CO, Colonel K.L. Sharma, was reconnoitring a drop zone for an upcoming airborne exercise; 3rd Para would form part of any follow-up action, later to be joined by 7th Para if the need arose. However, the bigger concern was whether a full battalion paradrop could be achieved in the event that it became necessary.

One of the most worrying things that emerged from the hasty preparations for the operation was the acute shortage of packed D-5 parachutes, which were required for deployment from An-32 and Il-76 aircraft. Only 65 D-5 parachutes were available. These were earmarked for use by any potential drop of a truncated company of paratroopers in the event that Hulhule airport was held by hostile forces. This was far from ideal, but it also was emblematic of the hasty preparation and the need to scramble available resources that were, in peacetime, in varying states of alert.[41]

The IAF's 4th Wing based at Agra was responsible for ensuring a proper supply of serviced parachutes, and it had 1,600 of them in stock. A full brigade drop would involve the use of 1,000 parachutes, although the IAF had sufficient transport to paradrop only a battalion at a time. The D-5 parachute needed to be fitted with an automatic activation device. While the 4th Wing had 65 fully prepared D-5s with this device ready, it had opened and serviced the rest of the stock. Some 500 D-5 parachutes without the automatic opening device were on hand in a packed state. While the requirement for parachutes could be met within six hours, the fact that the 4th Wing had only 65 automatic activation devices available meant that only that number of D-5 parachutes could have been made ready for carriage aboard the Il-76s, and this had a serious impact on planning.[42]

Getting the Para Battalions Ready

At 1045 hours, Major R.J.S. Dhillon, CO of C Company, 6th Para, was advised by Colonel S.C. Joshi, CO of 6th Para, that there would be a brigade-level operation led by 6th Para. However, he found that his available personnel, owing to other commitments, was a grand total of four – one other officer, one JCO and two other ranks. He faced a problem mustering transport when he was advised and urged to let a planned inspection go ahead. It was at that point that Dhillon spoke strongly to Captain Chand, the quartermaster, and emphasised that the vehicles were needed for an operation and not an exercise. Chand, a veteran of 9th Para Commando (now 9th Para SF), moved with alacrity to mobilise his vehicles, and also sent out a dispatch rider to get all available personnel back on duty as soon as possible.[43]

Joshi and Dhillon were then briefed by Brigadier Bulsara and Major Bhatia, who informed them about the coup in the Maldives and suggested that they had to cater for facing potentially up to 500 armed mercenaries. They were further informed that communications had been cut – which was not true – and that the whereabouts of the president was not known – which was also largely untrue. However, given the delay from the first information to the preparation for a response, the caution was understandable. Dhillon's company was to act as the pathfinder force for the brigade and was to proceed to the Ops Room of No. 44 Squadron.[44] This it did once it had initiated basic preparations.

Concerns were raised about the certification of troops on the D-5 parachute and Il-76 combination. In this regard, Dhillon was fortunate as his company had converted on the type upon 6th Para's return from the north-east. His bigger concern was that the standard battle rifle, the 7.62mm Ishapore SLR, could not be carried with the D-5 parachute, at least not safely. Dhillon was compelled to reconfigure his company, cutting the strength to accommodate the limited number of parachutes available and issuing them all with 9mm Sterling submachine carbines.[45] This meant, of course, that Dhillon's troops, if paradropped, would have been very lightly armed on landing, with other armament having to be dropped in weapons containers. This would have placed the pathfinders in a very precarious position as the rest of the company, along with other troops and equipment, would only be airlanded later as needed, taking into account the strength of the opposition.

Transport Challenges

Major Harkirat Singh was tasked with managing logistics for the operation by Colonel Chakrabarty, the second-in-command of the 50th Para Brigade. He had two major challenges, one of which was to obtain sufficient quantities of packed food for the troops, both rations prior to departure and rations for 48 hours in theatre. The second problem, which was much more challenging, was to muster sufficient transport to move a full para battalion together with its supplies, equipment, arms and ammunition to the Air Force Station at Kheria, near Agra.[46] This was to prove unexpectedly challenging for Major Singh, though he was eventually successful.

Out of the requirement of 40 vehicles, Major Singh had precisely two available, while of the 32 vehicles of the battalion transport company, only 12 were roadworthy – with six of these out of station and four transporting the children of battalion personnel to and from school. Given the need to maintain security, the recall of those vehicles was not immediately possible.[47] Requests to the base workshop made eight additional vehicles available, while other units of the 50th Para Brigade were able to muster a further three. As such, Major Singh was able to put together a fleet of 23 vehicles, which could perform the task of transporting 6th Para in two shifts. As each trip to Kheria would take one-and-a-half hours, the task could not be completed in much less than three hours, which placed the estimated time of completing the transport of 6th Para at around 1430 hours.[48]

The Intervention Force Takes Shape

Despite the chaos and muddled state of preparations, the initial intervention force began to take shape. The infantry component would be comprised of 6th Para, with C Company acting as the pathfinder force, being paradropped if necessary. A company from 3rd Para was added under Major N.K.S. Ghei, and the rest of 3rd Para was prepared for deployment in a second wave. The brigade was concerned about the possibility of having to conduct demolition operations, bridging, repairs and even a need to supply boats to cross from Hulhule to Malé or vice versa, so a platoon of 411 Para Field Company (Engineers) was prepared for action, again with parachute-qualified personnel being selected for the operation. Artillery support was in decent shape, with six 75/24 pack howitzers and personnel from two batteries of the 17th Para Field Regiment ready for deployment. This would provide the intervention forces with a reasonably well-balanced force that should have been capable of landing and achieving its objectives.

The leadership of the 50th Parachute Brigade was thus able to assemble a battalion-plus size group with artillery support within a few hours and transport the formation to the Air Force Station at Kheria. The force was, at least by the standards of the Indian Army in 1988, reasonably well equipped. The infantry units came prepared with their full range of small arms, but with C Company carrying a disproportionate number of 9mm submachine carbines.

Eventually, the Indian deployment in the first 24 hours would entail 1,650 personnel, who in addition to their normal combat package also brought with them four jeeps fitted with 106mm M40A1 recoilless rifles, seven 84mm Carl Gustav rocket launchers, seven medium machine guns, seven mortars – both 51mm and possibly 81mm – and, at least according to one account, 11 RPGs, which were not a standard weapon in the Indian military, along with 16 other vehicles.[49] Supporting this was an equally impressive air effort, given the circumstances and other commitments. Four Il-76s were committed to the operation, joined later by a fifth. These were used either in support of the 50th Para Brigade or in supporting the four Mirage 2000H aircraft that were deployed to Trivandrum. These were augmented by some 25 out of 30 available An-32 transports, four Mi-8 helicopters and, rather surprisingly, at least two Canberra bombers, which were deployed to Trivandrum along with the Mi-8s and Mirage 2000s.[50]

Not to be overlooked was the fact that the Indian Navy had also taken steps. Three of its surface assets – the warships INS *Godavari* and INS *Betwa*, along with the cadet training ship INS *Tir* – together with three naval aviation helicopters – one Sea King and one Chetak aboard the *Godavari* and one Chetak on the *Betwa* – were already en route to the Maldives and would be available to lend any support required by the ground personnel. Detachments of marine commandos were also aboard, lending additional specialist combat personnel to the Indian effort. These vessels would prove absolutely invaluable to Operation Cactus as the mission eventually took an unexpected turn.

By Indian, and indeed regional standards, this was an impressive force for an out-of area deployment, and one which was nearly 3,000km away from Indian territory. It would represent an ambitious venture, but one which could turn to tragedy if planning was not done properly and with due care and attention.

Planning the Intervention

All decisions as to whether to paradrop the force or to airland it were left to the collective wisdom of the leaders of No. 44 Squadron IAF and the 50th Parachute Brigade of the Indian Army. To this end, the leaders of the two units and their respective staffs met in the Briefing Hall of No. 44 Squadron at 1530 hours. The team from New Delhi – Group Captain Goel, Brigadier Malik and High Commissioner Banerjee – were also there, together with Major Kumar and a travel book on the Maldives, photocopies of charts, a photograph album and some sketches of Malé and Hulhule islands. The military leaders finally disclosed the nature of the task before them and that there was to be an operation conducted in the Maldives at very short notice. The personnel were briefed that there would likely to be armed opposition from a force of Tamil insurgents acting on behalf of disaffected elements in the Maldives.[51]

Banerjee was to prove invaluable as he was able to outline the situation to the military personnel, drawing on his extensive knowledge of the Maldives, its people and the physical features of the islands, and as to whether the people would be supportive of the coup. Banerjee was able to answer most of the Army's questions and to reassure the IAF that even though the length of Hulhule airport's runway was unknown to him, Boeing jets could land there. He was also able to avert a potentially fatal mistake (at least fatal to President Gayoom) when he noted certain problems with one of the maps the IAF was referring to. They were discussing a runway with an east–west orientation and located in an uninhabited area. This, he realised and pointed out very vociferously, was not Hulhule but the disused RAF base at Gan, 400km south of Malé.[52]

The issue of paradropping troops once again came to the fore when Brigadier Malik began briefing the assembled personnel. The question as to whether a paradrop was feasible arose during a discussion of possible drop zones – the football stadium, the reclaimed land on the coral reef and Hulhule airfield itself. Malik initially insisted that the pathfinders – C Company of the 6th Para Battalion – would be dropped into the football stadium on the island of Malé. Major Dhillon was at pains to explain the impracticality of a paradrop into a football stadium or even the reclaimed area, but Malik and the team from Delhi were adamant, suggesting smaller drops through a single door. This was vigorously opposed by Group Captain Bewoor, who pointed out that multiple passes over the target area would be needed to do this, which would remove any element of surprise and additionally enable the opposition to overwhelm the paratroopers as they descended, when they were at their most vulnerable. This argument went back and forth until Brigadier Bulsara stepped into the fray and pointedly asked what his task was. When informed that it was to rescue Gayoom and restore the government of the Maldives, he asked that his troops be airlanded on Hulhule.[53]

Bulsara's Plan

As he was uncertain about the security of Hulhule airport and its airfield, Bulsara planned for a number of contingencies. His initial planning called for a company group with the battalion HQ to be airlanded at Hulhule, provided that the airfield was secure and in safe hands – the planners had advised that some personnel from the Maldivian NSS had secured the airport, but this was not deemed to be certain. In the event the airport was not in safe hands, a reduced company of between 60 and 65 men would be paradropped from the Il-76 aircraft. Another company group with a tactical HQ would be accompanying them in another Il-76, and if the airlanding was deemed unsafe, at first light, a battalion group airborne assault would be launched from Trivandrum at first light on 4 November with the objective of capturing the airfield, with the rest of the brigade following thereafter and being airlanded at Hulhule.[54]

This initial plan was revised several times before Brigadier Bulsara eventually decided that 6th Para and 411 Para Field Company Engineers would be airlanded. From there, 6th Para would move to secure the airfield and a beachhead at Malé. From there, a dedicated High Risk Mission Team from 6th Para, trained in hostage rescue techniques, would try to locate and rescue or secure President Gayoom. One company of 6th Para would hold the airfield while a platoon would move out to join the company of 6th Para that held the beachhead. A company of 3rd Para would secure the jetty and launching area and collect all the dhonis and other boats at the main jetty.[55] This would secure the main installations necessary for a brigade build-up while rescuing the President and did not appear unduly risky given the available information.

Captain R.D. Poonekar was to lead a platoon to divert the attention of the insurgents while the rest of the brigade began landing at Hulhule airfield under the command of Colonel Chakrabarty, and the 3rd Para Battalion would be landed to reinforce 6th Para if this was deemed necessary. The engineers of 411 Para Field Company would secure the vital installations of the airport and operate boats to move troops into Malé as needed. It was thereafter envisaged that the operation would move towards the mopping-up phase, where the remaining insurgents would be neutralised and Malé and the government of the Maldives restored. It was also deemed that the medical teams of 60th Para Field Ambulance would be needed to assist where necessary.[56]

If there was any light armed opposition at Hulhule, Major Dhillon and his truncated company would be paradropped to secure the airfield along with a team from 411 Para Field Company to facilitate the landing of troops. However, in the event that Hulhule airport was in hostile hands, the entire operation would be aborted and the Il-76s

Loading of vehicles of the 6th Para into the hold of an Il-76MD. (Indian MOD Release)

would return to Trivandrum. An airborne assault would then be prepared with a force of An-32 transports using the reliable and more versatile PTR-M parachutes (which allowed the paras to carry the Ishapore SLR while jumping). This airborne assault would be conducted by 6th Para with a platoon of engineers from 411 Para Field Company at first light on 4 November, with 3rd Para being held in reserve, to be paradropped if needed. To meet this contingency, a stock of PTR-M parachutes was dispatched to Trivandrum from Agra. With transport aircraft, troops, supplies, combat aircraft and helicopters assembling at Trivandrum, this secondary air force station – and small airport – was acquiring a level of importance that it had hitherto not received since its role in Operation Pawan and its function as a logistics and transportation hub in support of the IPKF's military operations.[57]

One other issue was considered – that of air traffic control. While it was hoped that Hulhule's air traffic control tower and personnel would be operational and able to assist the Indian operation, this could not be considered as a certainty. To this end, the IAF was asked to include a team of air traffic controllers and safety officers. The IAF was able to get Pilot Officer U.K. Gambhir, who was trained in air traffic control but was off duty on 3 November, and a team of four airmen for airfield safety operations to Agra. They were embarked with a GU-734 communications set and 100 large kerosene lamps to serve as improvised runway landing lights.[58]

The final participant in this venture was a civilian. Brigadier Bulsara and his unit were acutely conscious of the fact that they lacked military maps and intelligence regarding the situation in the Maldives. None of the brigade's personnel had any familiarity with either the airport, its environs, Hulhule or Malé, which posed a serious challenge to the operation and dramatically increased the risks to the paratroopers during their initial landing. Furthermore, it enhanced the prospects of the operation itself being a failure.

Bulsara, lacking any other option, took the incredible decision to ask High Commissioner A.K. Banerjee to accompany the assault force. Perhaps to his own surprise, Banerjee readily agreed and after making a request that formal permission be given from the Ministry of External Affairs – and, in a lighter vein, that he be provided with a toothbrush and a shaving kit – he was prepared to accompany the assault group as an integral part of the military mission. Thus, an Indian diplomat, having received formal permission and his required toiletries, accompanied the Indian assault force, this perhaps being a historical first.[59]

The 'Friendlies' Depart

The first two Il-76s, carrying the main assault force, were designated 'Friendly One' and 'Friendly Two'. Group Captains Goel and Bewoor were initially in aircraft K-2999. The other aircraft was K-2878. This latter aircraft ended up carrying all three commanders of the 6th Para assault group, along with Brigadier Bulsara. With Colonel Joshi and Major Dhillon also aboard K-2878, concerns were raised that since K-2999 would be the first to depart and first to land, it would be necessary that the aircrews be changed so that the command group of the paratroopers and the senior IAF crew be present in the first aircraft to land. This was duly done, and there was an exchange of aircrew while the documentation was still being done and checks being prepared.[60]

With K-2878 now assuming the lead and designated 'Friendly One', all emplaning of paratroopers, equipment and weapons was completed by 1730 hours. K-2999, designated 'Friendly Two' and captained by Wing Commander A.S. Gill, was loaded with support equipment and additional personnel in the form of a company of 3rd Para, together with some personnel from 17th Para Field Regiment – their guns and ammunition arriving in the second wave of Il-76s. In total, the two Il-76s had 316 troops, one jeep-mounted 106mm M40A1 recoilless rifle and one communications jeep, as well as additional equipment and first-line ammunition for the troops.[61]

At 1756 hours, 'Friendly One' began its take-off process, and at 1804 hours it took off. Two minutes later, 'Friendly Two' followed it into the air, and as per their tradition, the paratroopers shouted their battlecry, "Chatri Mata ki Jai!" (Hail to the Goddess of the Parachute).[62]

Operation Cactus was thus underway.

5

THE INDIANS ARRIVE

The two Il-76s, with two reinforced paratroop rifle companies, covered the distance to Hulhule relatively peacefully, with no untoward incident during the flight. However, operational secrecy was of extreme importance. To this end, the air traffic control tower at Trivandrum airport was officially informed that a single aircraft – 'Friendly One' – was on a routine flight from Agra to Trivandrum. The second aircraft, 'Friendly Two', maintained radio silence and flew one kilometre behind the lead aircraft with its navigation lights switched off. They kept this position for four hours and passed over Trivandrum at 37,000ft, and it was only then when the controller at Trivandrum realised that they were diverting elsewhere. He was told the reasons and was ordered to keep it secret.[1]

The Flight and Landing

Concern over the state of the Hulhule airfield was the primary concern for the paratroopers. Though he had prepared for contingencies, Brigadier Bulsara was very worried about the possibility that a force of only 10 or a dozen insurgents could cross from Malé to Hulhule and seize control of the airport. As there were only 30–40 people on the airfield, even a small force of insurgents could capture it and so pose a major threat to the formation hoping to land there. The prospect of paradropping Major Dhillon's truncated company was not an enticing one.[2]

As communication was being maintained with the Maldives, albeit tenuously, a series of codes were worked out to communicate to the 'Friendly' formation that Hulhule airport was still in pro-Gayoom hands and that the formation was to continue with the mission. The code word selected was 'Valkyrie', and this was duly received by the formation. During this time, as the aircraft proceeded to the Maldives, Brigadier Bulsara briefed Colonel Joshi, Major Dhillon, Major Umed and Captain Poonekar on the final details of the operation. The officers in turn briefed their junior officers and JCOs, who themselves informed their eager troops.[3]

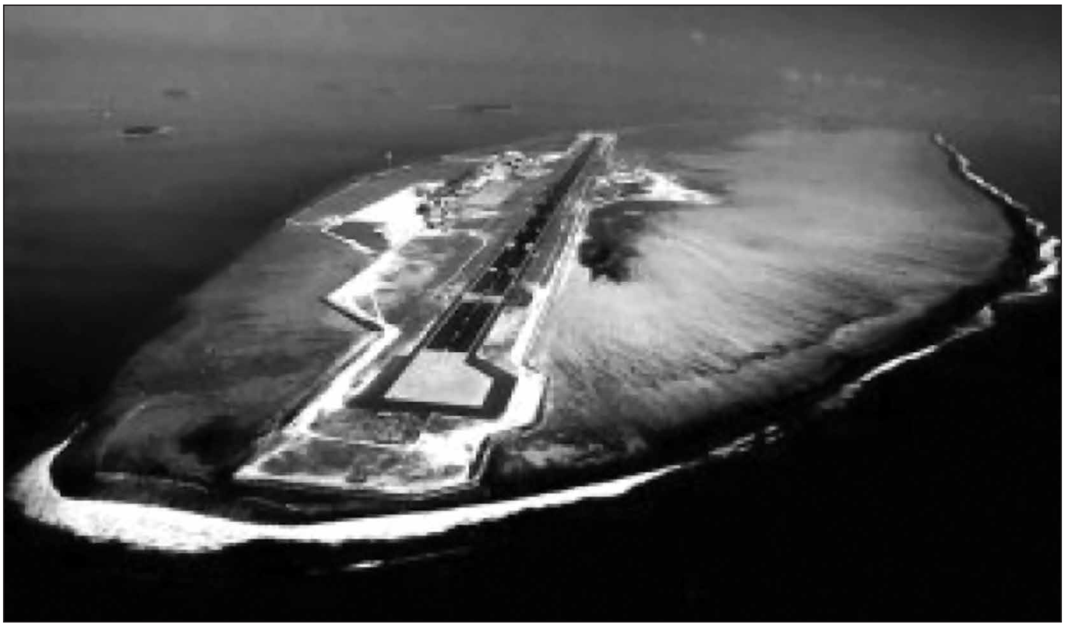
However, a rather more serious issue had to be addressed. When the troops were mustered at Kheria Air Force Station for emplaning aboard No. 44 Squadron's Il-76s, their ammunition had not been distributed. While there had been an attempt to distribute the ammunition to individual soldiers on the tarmac at Kheria, the unpleasant fact was that this process had not been completed; consequently, loosely boxed ammunition had to be carried aboard the aircraft. The process of its distribution therefore had to be carried out during the flight as it was possible that the troops would go into action immediately upon landing. Rather more inimical to flight safety, hand grenades were also primed in flight – fortunately, without problems.[4]

The contingency of 'Friendly One' being forced to abort was also considered. Given that the core command group was aboard that aircraft, Brigadier Bulsara designated Lieutenant Colonel K.K.K. Singh, who was the most senior Army officer aboard 'Friendly Two', to take charge in the event of such a situation warranting that action. There was no thought of aborting the whole mission, so Lieutenant Colonel Singh was in the unenviable situation of having to prepare his troops without himself being privy to the detailed briefings conducted by Bulsara.[5]

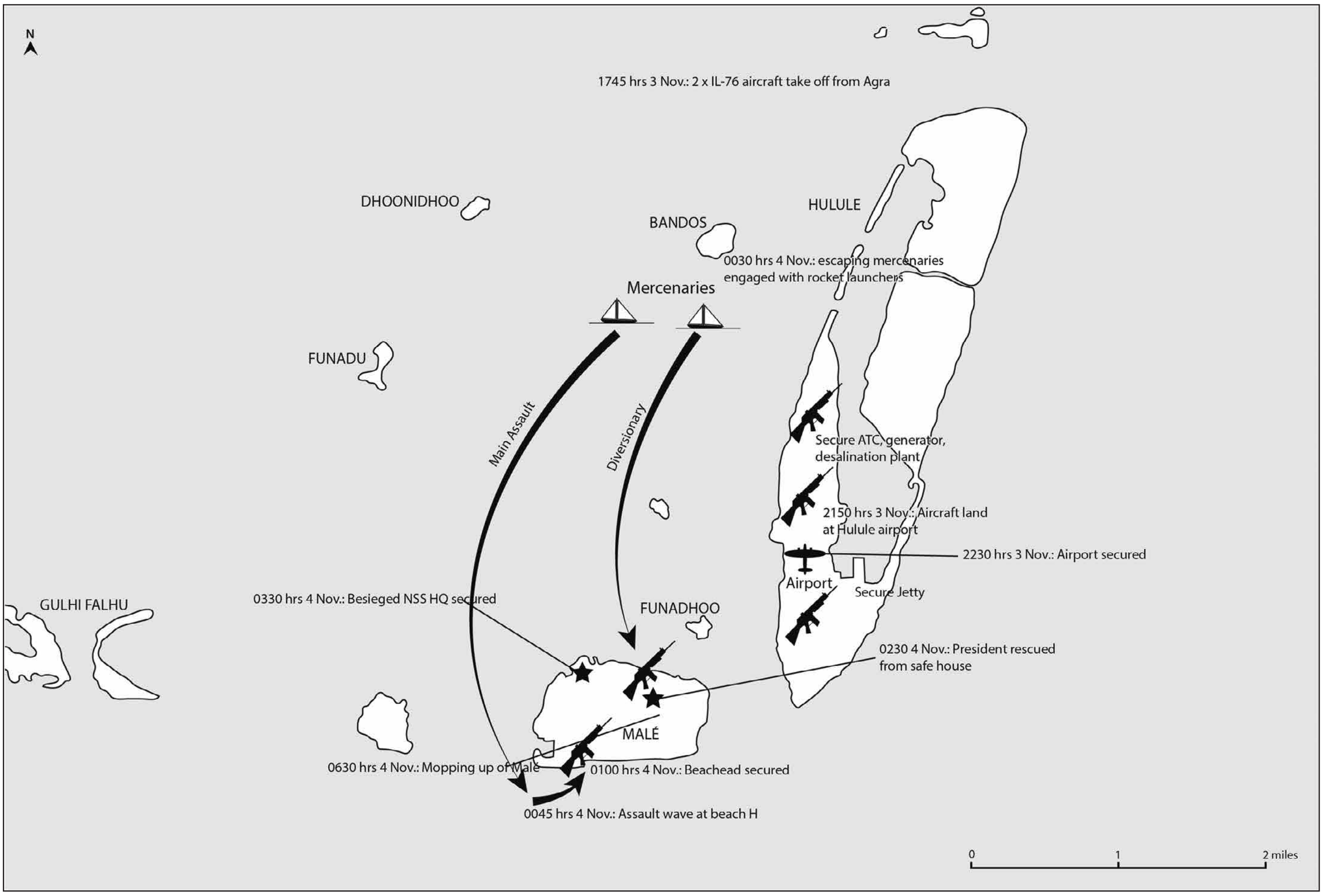
The rest of the flight proceeded in virtual radio silence. The air traffic control at Hulhule had been apprised of this in advance, so it did not expect any communications until the aircraft arrived. However, arrangements were made that a code word would be transmitted from Hulhule when the aircraft arrived to communicate whether the airfield was still in friendly hands and that the runway was safe for landing. This would, however, still present major challenges for the 'Friendly' formation: the landing would prove to be a difficult one as at least part of it would have to be done visually.

Throughout the flight, the aircrew had been operating with the limited bits of intelligence and information that had been gleaned from their briefings, the naval charts and the poor-quality tourist maps and photographs that were all the documentation they had upon which to base their flight plans and the landing. The airfield and runway were unknown to the crews, which would inevitably cause concerns for the pilots. Disorientation was a very real prospect, especially after an extremely tense flight of four hours' duration. The last 15 minutes of the flight were exceedingly nerve-racking as a result.[6]

At 2125 hours local time, 'Friendly One' established contact with the Hulhule air traffic control tower and spoke to the controller on



The only available photograph of the airport at Hulhule as of 1988. Mostly constructed on land reclaimed from the sea, and in the middle of the ocean, it was anything but easy to find by night and in darkness. (Indian MOD Release)


N
1745 hrs 3 Nov.: 2 x IL-76 aircraft take off from Agra
DHOONIDHOO
BANDOS
HULULE
0030 hrs 4 Nov.: escaping mercenaries engaged with rocket launchers
Mercenaries
FUNADU
Main Assault
Diversionary
Secure ATC, generator, desalination plant
2150 hrs 3 Nov.: Aircraft land at Hulule airport
2230 hrs 3 Nov.: Airport secured
Airport
Secure Jetty
GULHI FALHU
0330 hrs 4 Nov.: Besieged NSS HQ secured
FUNADHOO
0230 4 Nov.: President rescued from safe house
MALÉ
0630 hrs 4 Nov.: Mopping up of Malé
0100 hrs 4 Nov.: Beachhead secured
0045 hrs 4 Nov.: Assault wave at beach H
0
1
2 miles

Operation Cactus: Move and countermove by the PLOTE and Indian intervention forces. (Map by George Anderson)

duty. Group Captain Bewoor asked whether there was a message for him, and he was delighted to hear the code words ‘Hadhiya, Hadhiya, Hadhiya’. This was the signal that the runway was secure and that it was safe for the aircraft to land. It was the most welcome news that the intervention force could have received, as at least Dhillon’s men would not need to parachute into an unknown situation.[7]

As the two-aircraft formation approached Hulhule, the paratroopers prepared their weapons and received their last-minute instructions. The navigator in ‘Friendly One’, Wing Commander M.K. Singh, had been operating only using instruments and navigation aids. However, the approach would be difficult as it was at night, without runway lights and in the Indian Ocean, near the equator with strong crosswinds. ‘Friendly Two’ had broken formation as planned and was orbiting at an altitude of 3,000ft.[8] The lead Il-76’s ground mapping radar picked up a large echo due to the shallow coral reefs, and it was at that point that a request was made, when ‘Friendly One’ was only 25km away, that the runway landing lights be switched on. The lights were duly turned on for a short period, which allowed ‘Friendly One’ to orient itself for the final approach. However, to keep the element of surprise, the lights were then switched back off and ‘Friendly One’ came in to land in the dark and without any visual references. At an altitude of 200m above the sea, Bewoor indicated that the lights be switched on once again for the final touchdown. As the runway was illuminated, Bewoor brought the Il-76 in to land, whereupon the lights were immediately extinguished once more.[9]

The landing was relatively uneventful, in the circumstances. However, without lights, Bewoor had problems gauging the length of the runaway and there was a possibility of an overshoot, so he engaged reverse thrusts and applied the brakes. He was able to stop the aircraft only a short distance from the end of the runway, whereupon he turned it around and headed for the passenger terminal. It was 2200 hours local time. ‘Friendly Two’ arrived shortly thereafter.[10]

The Paratroops Disembark

As the ramps were lowered, the paratroopers, aided by the onboard parachute jump instructors, deplaned as quickly as possible. Initially they did not unload all their equipment as Major Dhillon and his team rushed to the terminal building and the air traffic control tower. Taking with them their weapons and haversacks, radio gear and engineering equipment, they quickly secured the airport and prepared to move out to secure other objectives. The containers of ammunition that had been left behind were unloaded and positioned on the tarmac under guard.[11]

The unloading of the ‘Friendly’ formation was accomplished within a very short space of time. Indeed, within 45 minutes of landing at Hulhule, the aircraft departed the Maldives and arrived back at Trivandrum by 2315 hours Indian time.[12] At Trivandrum and at Agra, the next wave of paratroopers, vehicles and artillery was prepared for departure, with 3rd Para in readiness to conduct a paradrop just in case. A force of An-12s, An-32s and Il-76s was leaving India with the rest of 6th Para, 3rd Para and supporting services to bolster the initial landing. Three more aircraft departed Agra that night, and between 2200 hours on 3 November and 0930 hours the next day, some 800 troops with vehicles had landed at Hulhule. By 1100 hours on 4 November, the full force of 1,650 men, four jeeps with 106mm guns, seven mortars, seven medium machine guns, six 75/24 pack howitzers, 12 other vehicles and associated supplies had been landed. While An-32s airlifted another

672 personnel on 5 November, involving the efforts of 15 An-32s, one An-12, two HS-748 Avros and six Il-76s, the task had by then largely been completed.[13]

As the jeeps and guns were being unloaded, Major Dhillon moved towards the control tower with a small party of men and secured the top floor, surprising the Maldivian staff, who were understandably scared despite being aware of the arrival of the Indian troops. As he had extensive training in both counterinsurgency and urban warfare, Dhillon's reassuring yet alert manner did much to calm the situation. A brief conversation in English with the Maldivian staff enabled him to get in telephonic communication with Major Mohammed Zahir of the embattled Maldivian NSS, who had been liaising with Hulhule to ensure the safe arrival of India's intervention troops, and who himself was also anxious.[14]

Major Zahir was able to brief Dhillon on the situation in Malé and on the problems facing the NSS HQ, which was under siege with a hole in its perimeter wall. While advising that the hole be blocked with sandbags, Dhillon assured Zahir that Indian troops would reach Malé shortly and that Indian military assistance was on hand and being deployed. This eased apprehensions as the Indian Army and Air Force personnel took control of Hulhule airport, its airfield and air traffic control tower. Indian troops secured their landing zone and thereafter ensured that there would be a safe spot for the landing of the follow-up units.[15]

Brigadier Bulsara and High Commissioner Banerjee, together with an escort, went to the air traffic control tower, and there the Maldivian controllers established contact with President Gayoom, who was in hiding. Reassuring the president that the Indian Army was on hand and that the Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, conveyed his greetings, Bulsara advised Gayoom that his troops would soon arrive to secure Malé and would also ensure the president's safety. He then asked for persons trusted by Gayoom who would lead his troops to the president's location without fear of being compromised.[16] This was duly done.

In the meantime, the engineers of 411 Para Field Company moved to take charge of the power and water supplies of Hulhule and Malé and had deployed specialist personnel. In addition, they provided security to those installations and were prepared to operate them in the event there was a need to do so. While a company of 6th Para had secured the jetty, as they prepared to move further into Malé, personnel from 411 Para Field Company moved to replace them, thereupon awaiting reinforcements that were already en route from India to the Maldives.[17]

As per the earlier request by the Indian military to secure the dhonis, speedboats and other vessels at the Malé jetty and bring them to Hulhule, the Maldivian authorities went one step further: Lieutenant Ahmed Zahir secured a total of 14 vessels, which included speedboats and dhonis as well as boats from two tourist resort islands. Their civilian operators, understandably scared with the combat going on around them, were not willing to ferry the Indian troops across, leaving the task to fall squarely on the shoulders of the personnel of 411 Para Field Company, who were unfamiliar with some of the types at their disposal.[18]

Nonetheless, some experienced personnel were able to overcome issues over starting some of the more advanced speedboats. Led by Sergeant (the Indian Army uses the term Havildar) P.D. Bhagat and Sergeant Surat Singh, the boats began to ferry the men of 6th Para across to Malé island. Encouraged by this, and reassured by the presence of armed Indian troops, civilian operators joined in the effort. Twelve boats, each with one 411 Para engineer aboard to guide the vessel along the specified route to the designated beach, were employed to move the personnel of 6th Para – and thereafter of 3rd Para and the medical personnel of 60th Para Field Ambulance – from Hulhule to Malé. This route was in continuous operation over the course of the Indian build-up on Hulhule and their deployment to Malé.[19]

With 6th Para securing the airfield, terminal and air traffic control tower at Hulhule, one company holding the jetty and 411 Para Field Company protecting vital infrastructure installations, the responsibility of securing all of Hulhule was eventually passed to 3rd Para while 6th Para's teams began their move to Malé. Using the 12 boats, Major Dhillon and Captain Singh led their men to land on the area of reclaimed land. Though some troops had to wade through 2ft of water at Malé, others were transported to a shallow beach south-west of the initial landing point in boats with a shallower draught. Some larger dhonis transported a full platoon to act as a diversion by simulating an assault landing at the main jetty in Malé, which was presumed to still be in insurgent hands.[20]

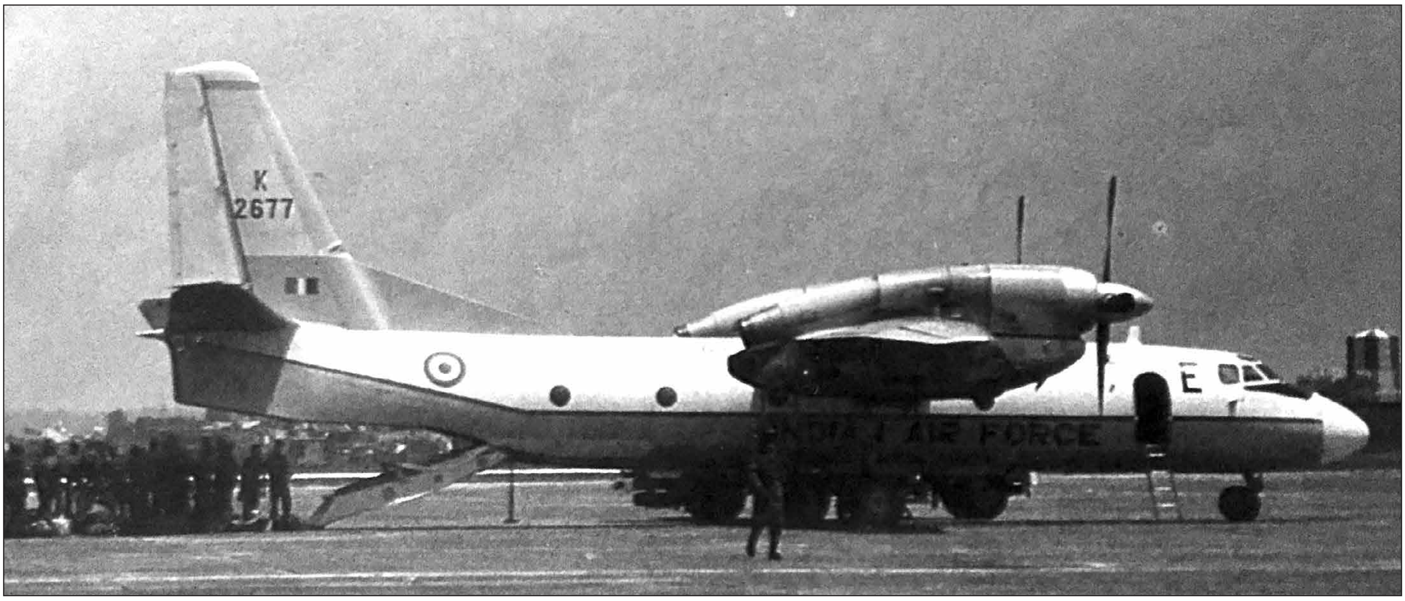
The CO of 6th Para was transported across on a subsequent trip, while Bulsara was not far behind as he was very concerned for the safety of President Gayoom because at 2300 hours local time he received communications through NSS Sergeant Sham that his troops had not yet reached the president, much less secured him. Bulsara went in search of his troops, but they had long-since departed. Nevertheless, he did see the bulk of a large vessel – the MV *Progress Light* – and realised that their quarry had flown, details of which will be given subsequently.

Securing the President

Once Major Dhillon reached Malé, he consolidated his position and awaited Gayoom's emissary. The paratroopers apprehended a lone cyclist, who turned out to be a member of the NSS sent to guide the paras to the house of the Maldivian defence minister. The Indian troops and the NSS man commandeered a pick-up truck, which enabled them to move more quickly to the defence minister's residence. This proceeded without anything untoward happening to the Indians or their guide. However, when they arrived at the defence minister's property, they were advised that Gayoom had been moved to another location for safety, and he deputed another guide to take him there.[21]

At Gayoom's hideout, his bodyguards were naturally very wary of a party of armed men coming to the door of the property. Dhillon then decided to move his Sikh troops to the front of his party so that the Maldivian security personnel would realise that it would be very unlikely that these were Tamil insurgents, even in disguise (Sikhs having distinctive beards and turbans). The security personnel let the Indian troops enter and found Gayoom, his wife and daughter – along with two trusted aides – hiding in the servants' quarters. Dhillon's presence and the greetings he reiterated from Rajiv Gandhi reassured and relieved Gayoom, while Captain Singh gave some toffees to the president's 8-year-old daughter – a young lady who would one day become the foreign minister of the Maldives.[22]

With Dhillon having reached the president at 0145 hours on 4 November, Brigadier Bulsara was able to move out from Hulhule. He nevertheless remained extremely concerned by the sporadic gunfire that was still erupting throughout Malé. Accompanied by Major Bhatia and a team from 6th Para, he went to meet President Gayoom. Major Dhillon, sharing concerns about Gayoom's safety, formed a human shield around the president and they proceeded to a safer location. This turned out to be the HQ of the NSS, which had by now been secured and was manned by both Indian troops and NSS personnel, with the insurgents having fled the scene.[23]



An An-32 of No. 33 Squadron embarking additional paratroopers for deployment on the Maldives. (Indian MOD Release)

Brigadier Bulsara was finally able to meet the president and to reassure him that Indian troops were moving out to secure Malé. Dhillon was then able to telephone New Delhi, routing the call through the Indian naval advisor in Sri Lanka. He connected directly with the Indian prime minister, who was awaiting the call with much anticipation and perhaps not a little apprehension. After thanking Major Dhillon, Rajiv Gandhi spoke to President Gayoom and the latter thanked the prime minister for the intervention and the presence of Indian troops. Brigadier Bulsara, Colonel Joshi and High Commissioner Banerjee all provided their own reassurances to President Gayoom that Malé would be secured and the insurgents apprehended.[24]

India Lands More Forces

As noted earlier, the Indian military continued a major build-up of forces on Hulhule. Artillery from the 17th Para Field Regiment landed in the second wave of aircraft, with three 75/24 pack howitzers arriving in the night with their ammunition. More troops from 3rd Para and 6th Para continued to arrive, and further support equipment and vehicles were brought in to Hulhule. The jeeps were particularly important, as on foot, the paratroopers were decidedly limited in their ability to move independently. Moreover, the four jeep-mounted 106mm recoilless rifles were invaluable in providing direct fire support to the otherwise lightly armed paratroopers. As many as 25 An-32 aircraft were involved in transporting troops and materiel from Agra to Trivandrum and then on to the Maldives archipelago, while the Il-76 and An-12 aircraft were able to operate with heavier loads directly from the Agra HQ of the 50th Parachute Brigade. All told, the effort deployed some 2,500 troops with support equipment to the Maldives.[25]

The final show of Indian strength was designed purely as a display of intent and intimidation. The Mirage 2000s of No. 7 Squadron, four of which were at Trivandrum, were ordered to carry out a force projection. At 0800 hours Indian time, having prepared their route, determined the coordinates and prepared the maps and charts needed, Battle Axe 1, flown by Wing Commander Vaidya, and Battle Axe 2, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Nambiar, were launched, followed some 30 minutes later by the two aircraft of the Kirpan formation with Squadron Leaders Dhanda and Panesar. These aircraft flew the 600km to Malé at 6,000ft and then made a low-level pass over Malé and its neighbouring islands to send a message to any remaining insurgents. The four aircraft returned to Trivandrum within two hours and were back at their home base at Gwalior two days later.[26]

India had thus secured President Gayoom and had apparently saved his government. However, Luthufee and the PLOTE insurgents had fled the scene and the action would now shift to the high seas, where a maritime hostage situation was unfolding as the Indian Navy remorselessly closed in on the mercenaries with no intention of letting them escape.

6

LUTHUFEE'S ESCAPE AND ENDGAME

After landing Luthufee and his PLOTE mercenaries, the two fishing trawlers that had been used for the task were sent back to Sri Lanka. At 2200 hours, as the IAF Il-76 transports approached, the noise as they deployed thrust-reversers upon landing alerted Luthufee and the PLOTE mercenaries, now led by Raju following the death of Vasanthi. The insurgents saw the aircraft land, listened to their engines running and eventually saw the Indian troops disembark, observing the silhouettes of armed troops moving around Hulhule. Yet rather than prompting the PLOTE fighters to engage them, Luthufee and those insurgents around him decided to seek a way out.[1]

Rallying as many of his combatants as he could – some 60 in total (two were killed, and three were caught trying to escape in a rubber dingy) – he engaged the Indian troops in only a short battle. Operating in disorder, they were easily overrun, with some 30 insurgents and several local supporters being captured. Luthufee escaped and made for the harbour, together with a handful of combatants and – according to unofficial sources – seven hostages (including the Maldivian minister of transport, Ahmed Mujuthaba, and his Swiss-born wife, Ursula). Luthufee, as might be expected, was looking for a ship to make good his escape, and with some good fortune he found one.[2]

The MV *Progress Light*, a cargo ship owned and captained by M.K. Jayadevan – an Indian – with a crew of 20, had just dropped anchor in the Maldives. Carrying a cargo of imported premium liquor and cars, the vessel had come to Malé from England and was intending to disembark its cargo. However, with the crew still aboard, the ship was boarded by Luthufee and his mercenaries, with hostages in tow. At gunpoint, the crew was ordered to weigh anchor and navigate out of the harbour. As a subterfuge, Luthufee kept the lights of the vessel on, though absolute darkness offered his best chance of escape.[3]

Luthufee's gamble backfired spectacularly. As the *Progress Light* moved into the narrow channel between Hulhule and Malé, it was a well-illuminated target, all deck lights being brightly lit. However, to Brigadier Bulsara, it was inconceivable that any ship would be leaving harbour when there was a major armed confrontation going on, with the risk of being caught in the inevitable crossfire. As the vessel moved towards the main cargo route – known as Gaadhoo Kolu – off the southern coast of Hulhule, NSS HQ was contacted and they apprised Hulhule air traffic control tower that the PLOTE mercenaries had fled and were aboard that ship. Major Zahir of the NSS then made a request through Sergeant Sham that the Indians stop the vessel from escaping.[4]

Bulsara, having realised that the mercenaries were making an escape, or at least some elements supporting them were trying to flee the scene, took decisive action. With the vessel offering an easy target, Bulsara wasted no time and ordered his men to open fire. Carl Gustav teams from 3rd Para and a company of 6th Para, located at the western end of the island, engaged the *Progress Light*, scoring several hits on it with the Carl Gustav rockets and a medium machine gun team under the direction of Major Umed Singh. But while the vessel was damaged, it was still seaworthy and by 0430 hours it had disappeared over the horizon. After initially heading for Java, the *Progress Light* steamed for Colombo, hoping that the 90 minutes or so of darkness left would be sufficient to make their escape and evade Indian attempts to locate them.[5]

The Hunt for the *Progress Light*

With Brigadier Bulsara having secured President Gayoom, the focus now shifted to the *Progress Light* and its hostages. The fact that Mujuthaba's wife was Swiss brought with it additional complications, as that country's neutrality – combined with inevitable sensitivity in such matters – would make armed action by Indian forces potentially unpalatable. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi therefore invited the Swiss ambassador to India to attend a meeting at the Naval War Room in New Delhi's South Block, which housed many of India's Ministry of Defence offices and administrative facilities.[6] This allowed the ambassador to get as close to a real-time appreciation of the situation as was possible in 1988, enabling him to understand both the situation in Malé and the overall picture as the Indian Navy tried to establish a *cordon sanitaire* around Malé and Hulhule – a difficult task with only three ships on station in the area. Moreover, with Malé currently being secured by only 6th Para and 3rd Para, and with reinforcements still being brought in, the initial priority was for the Indian Army to ensure that the country was at the very least in no danger of any further hostile action from the insurgents or any residual local support.

With the situation becoming clearer, the India Navy took the step of ordering its maritime reconnaissance aircraft to locate the *Progress Light*. Consequently, on the morning of 4 November, Indian Il-38 and Tu-142 maritime reconnaissance aircraft were launched. At this time, additional naval assets were converging on the Maldives in the form of the missile destroyers *Rajput* and *Ranjit*, the missile frigate *Gomati*, the Leander-class frigate *Nilgiri* and the converted Whitby-class frigate *Trishul*, together with the Kumbhir-class landing ships *Kumbhir* and *Cheetah* and the fleet tanker *Deepak*, to support the three ships already on station.[7] The *Deepak* was also carrying a 25-man team from the Marine Commando Force (MCF), which would be transferred to another warship as became necessary. The MCF

Operation Cactus saw the Tu-142MK-Es of the Indian Naval Aviation flying their first operational sorties ever. Notable on this example photographed in the late 1980s is the overall grey livery and insignia, including the serial number IN 313. (Indian MOD Release)

An Il-38 of the Indian Naval Aviation, flying low over the sea. (Indian MOD Release)

team would prove to be vital to the success of the Indian mission, despite not having any prior combat experience in this regard.

At 0925 hours, an Il-38 from INAS 315 located the MV *Progress Light* about 40 miles from Malé.[8] The aircraft kept the ship under constant surveillance, being joined by Tu-142 aircraft of INAS 312 and Alizes of INAS 310, all of which kept the vessel under surveillance while Indian Navy surface warships moved to intercept. INS *Betwa* was the closest vessel to the fleeing cargo ship, and it received the unexpected but nonetheless welcome assistance of a US warship's helicopter which passed on additional information on the speed, course and position of the MV *Progress Light* at around 2230 hours. The *Betwa* was thus able to make contact with the *Progress Light* at 0245 hours on 5 November.[9]

Intercepting the *Progress Light*

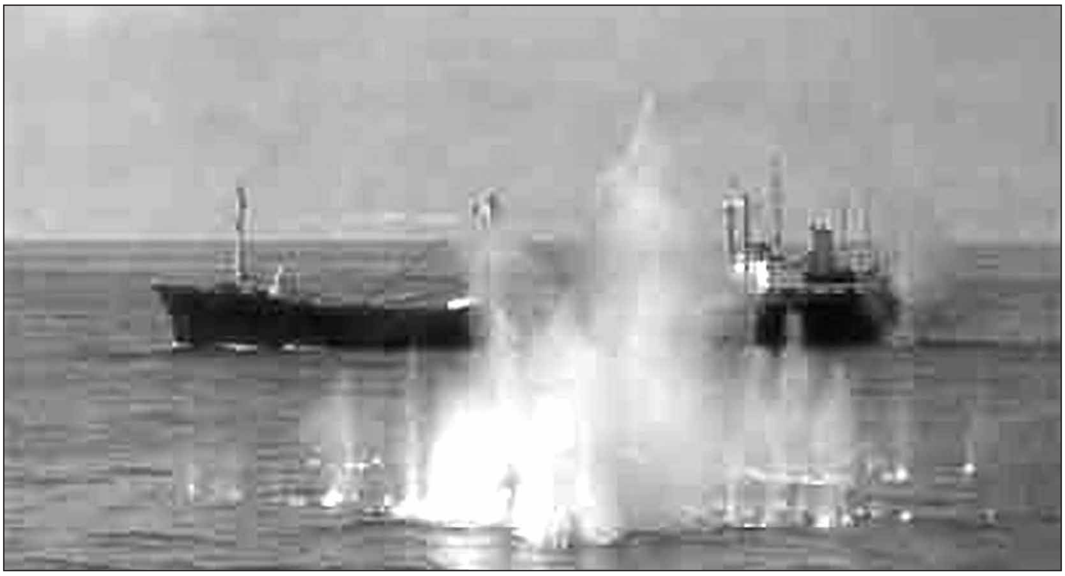
When the *Betwa* made visual contact with the *Progress Light* at 0340 hours, the cargo ship was steering 070 degrees at seven knots. The *Betwa* trailed the *Progress Light* at a distance of six nautical miles. The insurgents, becoming aware of the pursuit, attempted to persuade the Indian Navy to let them go. They openly flaunted their weapons, and in response, the *Betwa* moved its 4.5-inch guns to cover the vessel.[10] The PLOTE insurgents, realising there was going to be no easy way out for them with Indian warships in the vicinity, initiated communications with PLOTE leader Uma Maheswaran in Sri Lanka with a view to extricating themselves from an increasingly untenable situation, one which was fraught with the prospect of additional casualties.

INS *Betwa* was joined by INS *Godavari* and later INS *Tir*. Of the three vessels, only the *Godavari* could be considered a fully modern, combat-capable vessel. The other two, as noted earlier, were used for training purposes, with a disproportionate number of the communications personnel aboard being trainees from the Naval Signals School who were not as proficient as fully trained personnel in respect of their ability to quickly transmit, receive and where necessary decode signals.[11] The *Betwa* and *Godavari* were equipped with onboard helicopters, which added to their flexibility in responding. While en route to the Maldives, a team of Maldivian negotiators, including Major Adam Saheer, had been sent to Colombo and then transferred to the *Godavari* via the ship's Sea King helicopter.[12] With this team aboard, the *Godavari* had steamed at high speed to the Maldives, and once it had intercepted the *Progress Light*, the captain of the *Godavari*, S.V. Gopalachari, made contact with the *Progress Light* on Channel 16 and demanded that the vessel either divert to an Indian port or return to the Maldives. This was the beginning of a tense standoff, a period of negotiations between the two sides with the attendant risks to the hostages.

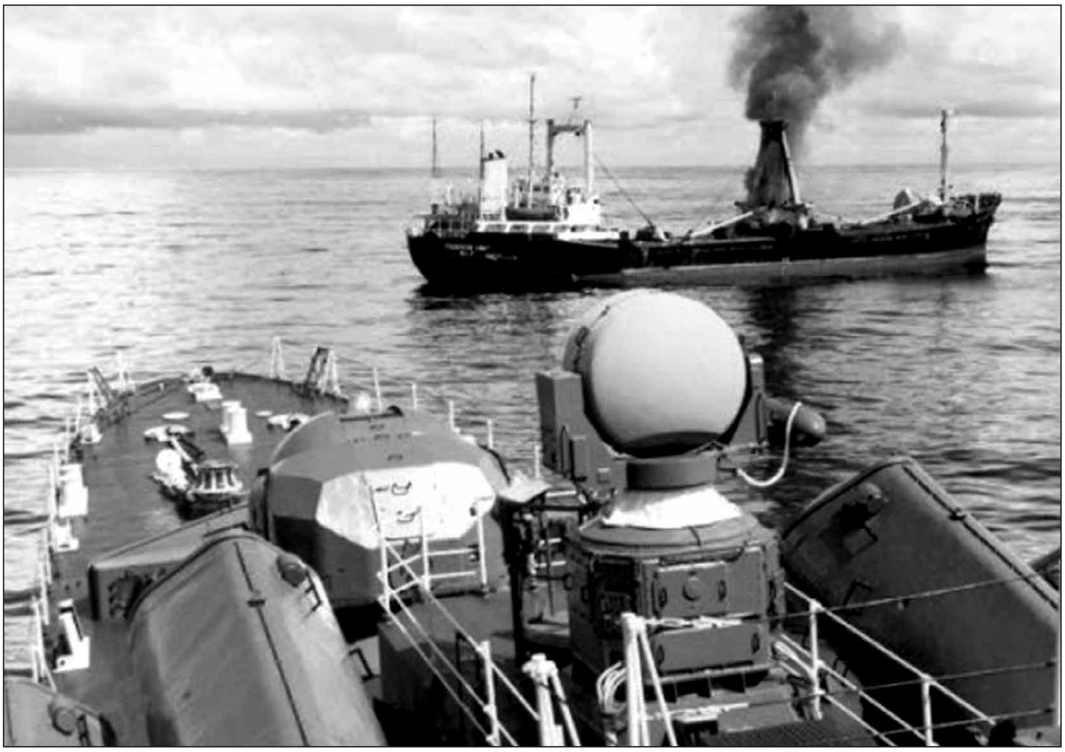
The Indian Navy was under the understandable suspicion that the PLOTE insurgents were trying to buy time for them to reach Sri Lanka. This was reinforced by the fact that Maheswaran was at first trying to convince the Indians that they should allow the *Progress Light* to dock in Tamil Nadu in southern India, where the insurgents would surrender, but then suddenly changed his demands. He now stated that the vessel would sail to Sri Lanka and requested that the Indians force President Jayewardene to grant the PLOTE insurgents an amnesty.

This was unacceptable to both Sri Lanka and India. Maheswaran went so far as to meet the Indian High Commissioner in Sri Lanka to plead for acceptable terms, whereupon he was advised that India would extradite the PLOTE insurgents to Sri Lanka and the Maldivians to the Maldives. Maheswaran was not pleased.[13] The situation was made even worse when Indian intelligence agencies learned that several vessels of the Sri Lankan Navy had sortied with

A Chetak helicopter of the Indian Naval Aviation. Note that all cabin doors have been removed to make for easier embarkation and disembarkation – but also for improved ventilation in the hot and humid climate of the Indian Ocean. (Indian MOD Release)



A still from a video showing MV *Progress Light* under fire from INS *Godavari* and INS *Betwa*. (Indian MOD Release)



A view from the bridge of INS *Godavari*, showing the oil drums positioned at the centre of the MV *Progress Light* on fire after sustaining hits from the gunfire of two Indian warships. (Indian MOD Release)

The evacuation of hostages from MV *Progress Light*. Although lacking necessary specialist training, the sailors of the Indian Navy eventually achieved their aim with relatively few losses to the hostages. (Indian MOD Release)

a view to sinking the *Progress Light* when it came within 100 miles of Colombo. This effectively set a timeline for the Indian Navy to resolve the situation in a satisfactory manner or run the risk of an unnecessary confrontation with the Sri Lankan Navy.

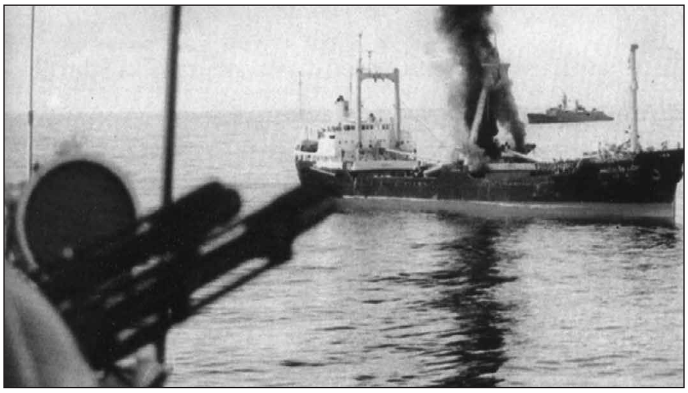
Uma Maheswaran continued his pleading with the Indian High Commissioner in Colombo to allow the PLOTE insurgents and their Maldivian allies to berth in Sri Lanka, with the latter to be granted asylum and the former amnesty. The Indian High Commissioner steadfastly refused, advising Maheswaran to approach the Sri Lankan authorities directly. This he apparently did, but he was rebuffed most strenuously by Jayewardene's government. In the meantime, the Directors of Naval Operations in Sri Lanka and India were in contact with each other, and subsequently the Indian Navy pushed the PLOTE insurgents to surrender without conditions.[14]

The Indian Navy Acts

The captain of INS *Betwa*, Captain Gokhale, had been asked by the captain of the *Godavari* if the *Betwa* was ready, if necessary, to fire on the *Progress Light*. The two skippers, at that point, did not have an Officer in Tactical Command,[15] a role which eventually fell to the *Godavari*'s CO, Captain Gopalachari. The two vessels then readied their weapons and had sailors man light machine guns along their railings for additional gunfire support. INS *Deepak*, with its 25 MCF personnel aboard, was meanwhile en route to the area, and helicopters were ready to transfer the personnel to INS *Godavari*. In the interim, boarding parties of armed sailors were prepared.

The PLOTE mercenaries then received instructions from Maheswaran to kill one of the hostages. Despite the vehement protests and objections of Minister Mujuthaba, one hostage was killed and thrown overboard. Yet rather than compelling the Indians to back down, this action merely firmed their resolve, and upon receiving news of the murder of one of the hostages, New Delhi issued instructions to Captain Gopalachari to be resolute with the insurgents. This set the stage for a major escalation as the Indians decided to end the standoff.[16]

The insurgents, through Maheswaran, made a request to speak to officials in Singapore, but the *Betwa* began jamming most of the *Progress Light*'s communications. The Indian Navy ships then issued warnings on Channel 16, whereafter, at a range of 2–3km, INS *Godavari* opened fire with its 57mm guns, hitting the *Progress Light* wit vessel several rounds. At 0250 hours on 6 November, the *Godavari* directed the *Betwa* to also open fire, with a view to crippling the *Progress Light*. The *Betwa* began firing with its twin 4.5-inch guns at the forward part of the cargo vessel, letting off some 47 rounds, while the *Godavari*'s 57mm guns targeted the aft. Although the



Another view of MV *Progress Light*, with smoke rising from the damage caused amidships. (Indian MOD Release)

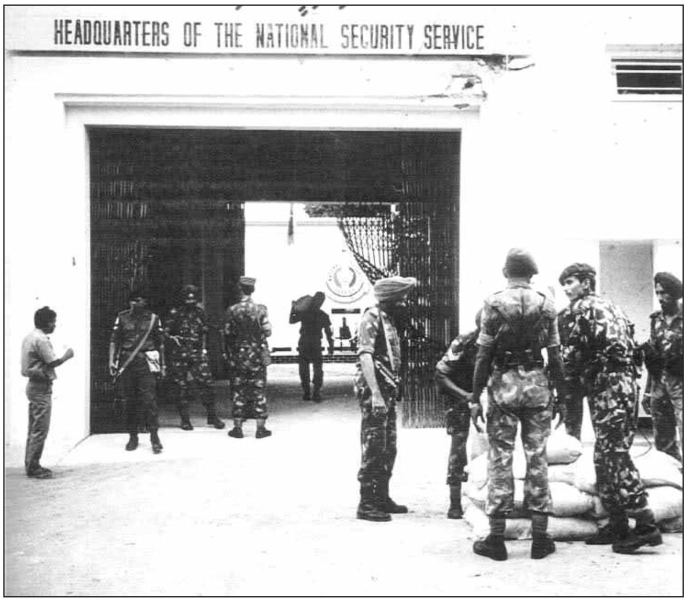
insurgents returned fire, their short-range weapons were ineffective against the Indian ships. A lull then ensued until 0430 hours, when the Indian vessels resumed their fire. INS *Godavari* hit the *Progress Light* again with its 57mm guns, while the *Betwa* did likewise, firing an additional 24 rounds from its main armament. At 0550 hours, the *Godavari* opened fire with its AK-230 guns at close range.[17] Whether through this action or another cause, oil drums on the deck of the *Progress Light* then caught fire, but the ship kept moving forward in a desperate attempt to escape. However, the insurgents now realised that time was running out.

In India, there were concerns that the Sri Lankan Navy would intercept and sink the *Progress Light*. To prevent the loss of all the hostages, Captain Gopalachari was ordered to stop the vessel at all costs. The MCF team was also airlifted to be ready for any necessary action. The die was thus cast for the endgame to play out. To add to the pressure, an Alize helicopter from INAS 310 made low-level flying passes over the *Progress Light* and the *Godavari*'s Sea King was also launched, dropped two depth charges in front of the ship's bows, virtually 'lifting the vessel out of the water.'[18]

In a show of bravado, the insurgents threatened to commit suicide, fighting to the end. However, at that point, the *Betwa* opened fire once again and by 0845 hours, the *Progress Light* had been hit twice more and a major fire had broken out amidships. The damage to the hull from gunfire and the fire on deck caused the power supply to fail, which put both the rebels and hostages in imminent fear of the sinking of the ship. Both groups came up on deck and the insurgents finally signalled their intention to surrender.

The *Godavari* put its boats in the water and rescued the hostages and crew members, among them the Maldivian minister and his wife, but the second engineer of the *Progress Light* was missing. In the interim, light machine guns fired at the insurgents to keep them under pressure while a boarding party took control of the *Progress Light* and searched it thoroughly, tragically finding several corpses, including that of the second engineer. All documents of the ship and some from the insurgents were seized by the Indian Navy teams. The boarding team left shortly thereafter and the insurgents began surrendering.[19]

Of the insurgents, their surviving commander, Raju, was the last to depart, while Luthufee claimed that he should be treated as the 'President of the Maldives'. Whereas the insurgents were tied with nylon ropes after being thoroughly searched and secured in the helicopter hangar under guard, Luthufee was blindfolded, his hands tied behind his back and locked in a toilet. This marked an ignominious end to an audacious gamble on the part of Luthufee and his PLOTE colleagues. However, it ended in failure thanks to resolute Indian action and some determined NSS resistance. Unfortunately, it came at a cost of 11 civilians and eight NSS soldiers who were killed by the insurgents.[20]


HEADQUARTERS OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY SERVICE

Indian paratroopers constructing defence positions in front of the entrance to the HQ of the NSS. (via Adrien Fontanellaz)

The Aftermath

The *Progress Light* met a sad end, sinking the next day while the *Godavari* evacuated eight seriously wounded and traumatised

Uma Maheswaran after being taken into custody by Indian armed forces. (Indian Ministry of Defence)

Luthufee after being captured by Indian armed forces. (via Sanjay Badri-Maharaj)

Indian paratroops chatting with locals on the streets of Malé, once the situation was stabilised after the suppression of the coup. (Press Trust of India)

hostages and crew by helicopter to Trivandrum. The *Godavari*, *Betwa* and *Tir* returned to Malé. The latter two ships left within a week, while the *Godavari* stayed for a month along with 500 Indian paratroopers, at the request of the Maldivian government. During intense searches by the Indian forces, including the newly inducted 7th Para, and NSS troops, 20 suspects were arrested on suspicion of assisting in the attempted coup. The cleansing of Malé was completed within a day, though the process continued for two more, to ensure thoroughness.

After interrogation by many agencies, including India's RAW, the perpetrators of the coup were put on trial. They numbered 75 in total, including seven Maldivians and 45 Sri Lankans. Luthufee and three other Maldivians were sentenced to death, while 12 members of PLOTE were each sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment, with 33 more being sent into exile. Rather surprisingly, but perhaps quite in character, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi interceded with President Gayoom to commute the death sentences to life imprisonment on 16 September 1989. The following day, President Gayoom announced that he wished no blood to be shed and duly commuted the death sentences. Luthufee expressed deep gratitude for the Indian intervention in this regard but continued to view Gayoom as a dictator.[21]

India learned many lessons from the coup in the Maldives and its aftermath. It considered itself somewhat fortunate to have been able to intervene before any other power could muster assets to do so. While this might not seem like a major concern, India's move towards becoming a net security provider in the region received a major boost from Operation Cactus. The fact that a US task force and a British destroyer were just four hours away from Malé on 5 November 1988 suggests that India's timing was all but perfect.

Yet India's scramble to put together an intervention force led to major revisions in its procedures to enable a rapid response. Since that time, the 50th Para Brigade has kept one battalion and a six-gun battery of artillery on four-hour notice. A battalion-level operational load was kept with parachutes, while manpacks, ready-to-eat meals, arms and ammunition and a full set of parachutes for a battalion-level paradrop were all kept ready, whereas heavy loads for major operations were moved into sheds closer to their needed positions for airlift.[22] This was combined with a major effort on the part of the Indian military to gain knowledge about and keep maps on countries in the region which might require assistance in the form of armed intervention. The days of using tourist maps, photo albums and picture books became a thing of the past, aided by a vastly improved network of communication and surveillance. While the Parachute Regiment began to orient itself heavily towards a Special Forces role for operations behind enemy lines, the Para Brigade is very much operational, and with new artillery and BMP-2 Infantry Combat Vehicles is a more effective force. They also have enhanced amphibious assault capabilities and new heavy transport aircraft.

The Maldives and India retain a very close relationship, despite a major setback between 2013 and 2018 during the presidency of Abdullah Yameen, who took an overtly pro-China and anti-India position but who also embarked on a campaign of political intimidation, subversion of institutions and even political murders. Since Gayoom left office in 2008, this was the most serious challenge to democracy in the Maldives, but it came to an end when Yameen lost the 2018 elections and was subsequently sentenced to five years

Troops of the 6th and 7th Para during a farewell parade shortly after their withdrawal from the Maldives. (Indian MOD Release)

FAREWELL
6TH BATTALION PARACHUTE
REGIMENT INDIAN ARMY

Commanders of the 6th Para with Maldivian officials. (Indian MOD Release)

in prison and a fine of US$5 million after being found guilty of money-laundering.

Rajiv Gandhi lost the 1989 Indian elections, partly due to corruption allegations but also due to a level of discontent over the intervention in Sri Lanka. His political comeback ended in tragedy when he was assassinated by LTTE terrorists in 1991 while campaigning for the Indian general election of that year. His assassination, curiously enough, changed India's fate, as the new prime minister, P.V.N. Rao, embarked upon a programme of economic liberalisation that began to lift more Indians out of poverty than ever before, though the task remains incomplete.

The final player in the saga was Uma Maheswaran. PLOTE, of course, never recovered from this utter debacle. It slowly morphed into a political party, but Maheswaran would never see it so evolve. On 16 September 1989, he was assassinated by members of an unknown group in Colombo.[23]

APPENDIX I

In the aftermath of the 1988 coup attempt, at least a part of the land forces formerly operated by the NSS was reorganised as special forces units. Separately, the Marine Corps was established as a part of the Coast Guard, providing the following:

Assistance to the Coast Guard in maritime operations

Assistance to the civil authorities at times of crisis
Search and rescue operations
Providing KP guards
Undertaking combat operations
Conducting counterinsurgency
Carrying out counterterrorism operations

This provides the Maldives with a core of highly trained, reasonably well-equipped and deployable personnel who are capable of dealing with a small operation of the type that occurred in 1988. However, the Maldives is not naïve enough to believe that it could cope with a major insurrection or coup attempt by a large force on its own. To this end, it retains close relationships with regional military powers, particularly India. The fact that the Indian Navy and Coast Guard conduct a very high level of surveillance and operational reconnaissance of the Indian Ocean region is perhaps a tangible legacy of 1988, where the vulnerability of the Maldives to armed incursions was vividly displayed.

However, in 1988, it is hard to describe the NSS of the period as being anything other than a mishmash, with police, firefighting, guard and limited military roles all being grouped into one small and rather modest force. Nevertheless, it was by no means a useless entity. Its officers did receive training at overseas military establishments and its personnel were armed. While the NSS did not have much by way of heavy equipment, it did possess a useful inventory of small arms and equipment. Some 400 of the 700 NSS personnel on strength at the time were armed with Kalashnikov-type assault rifles. Those assigned to policing tasks were armed with .38 calibre revolvers and .32 calibre automatic pistols.

APPENDIX II

In the aftermath of the events of 1988, the Maldives moved towards improving the NSS and converting it into a viable military force. The policing functions of the NSS was hived-off in 2004, and as noted, converted into a proper police entity in 2006 under the Ministry of Home Affairs, where it continues to function as a largely civilian-run body with few of its former paramilitary attributes, leaving the militarised functions of the state to the new Maldives National Defence Force which was to emerge from the NSS. The NSS, and then the MNDF, were then placed under the direction of the Ministry of Defence and National Security. The Ministry of Defence, as it is now termed, has responsibilities for the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF), the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC), the country's Aviation Security Command (AVSECOM), the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), Maldives Immigration and the Maldives Customs Service, making it a multi-disciplinary ministry. As of 2021, the Maldives National Defence Force Air Wing remains a modest entity and only possesses about three aircraft, all maintained and sometimes flown by Indian personnel. These include a Dornier Do-228 for maritime patrol duties and two HAL Dhruv advanced light helicopters, which are used for a combination of maritime patrol, surveillance, search and rescue and light transport tasks. Given the inevitable maritime focus of the security of the Maldives, the Air Wing works in close coordination with the Coast Guard and is capable of providing adequate levels of support to any maritime operation, aided where needed by Indian assets.

Nowadays, the Maldives Coast Guard is made up of the vessels shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Maldives Coast Guard[1]

Vessel	Notes
106 *Nirholhu*	Tracker-class patrol boat
CGS *Ghazee*	Dvora-class fast patrol boat
CGS *Iskandar*	Dvora-class fast patrol boat
L-301	Hamilton Jet Model HM422 fast landing craft
E-9 Fire and Rescue	17m fire rescue boat (modified patrol boat)
CGS *Huravee*	Trinkat-class patrol vessel
CGS *Shaheedh Ali*	patrol craft

The Maldives Coast Guard showed its ability in 2007 when, confronted with a gunrunning vessel of the then extant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the CGS *Huravee* engaged the LTTE vessel after negotiations failed and sank it with gunfire from its 30mm main armament. The Maldives Coast Guard has been able to apprehend between 100 and 200 vessels engaged in acts of poaching, illegal fishing and piracy in the Maldives EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) on an annual basis. This aggressive approach to the EEZ and the patrol of territorial waters has been aided by close cooperation with the Indian Navy and a linked coastal radar network.

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31 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.48–49.

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1 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.50.
2 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.50, 65. The Mirage 2000 fleet would become the go-to aircraft for the IAF for a plethora of tasks, but their choice for Operation *Cactus* as escorts was eminently sensible. As the only true multi-role aircraft in the IAF, and being able to carry both air-to-air and air-to-surface armament simultaneously, plus having a good combat radius, the Mirage 2000 was best suited to escort the transports. The previous experience of using the Mirage 2000 in such a role was Operation *Poomalai* in 1987, which involved the escorting of An-32 transports to drop food for Sri Lanka's Tamils in Jaffna.
3 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.89.
4 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.90.
5 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.63.
6 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.64.
7 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.64.
8 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.65.
9 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.67.
10 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.92.
11 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.92.
12 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.51–53.
13 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.51–53.
14 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.51–53.
15 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.53.
16 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.54.
17 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.55.
18 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.55–56.
19 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.55–56.
20 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.55–56.
21 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.58.
22 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.58–59.
23 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.59.
24 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.59.
25 Vinod Bhatia, 'Operation Cactus', *Salute* (10 June 2016), https://salute.co.in/operation-cactus/.
26 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.60.
27 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.60.
28 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.60–61.
29 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.67.
30 Bhatia, 'Operation Cactus'.
31 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.69.
32 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.69–70.
33 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.75–77.
34 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.75–77.
35 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.77.
36 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.78.
37 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.78.
38 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.78.
39 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.78.
40 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.78–79.
41 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.79.
42 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.38.
43 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.70.
44 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.71.
45 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.71.
46 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.73–74.
47 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.44.
48 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.44.
49 A.K. Tiwary, *Indian Air Force in Wars* (New Delhi: Lancer, 2012), pp.295–301.
50 Tiwary, *Indian Air Force in Wars,* pp.295–301 & Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.235.
51 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.81.
52 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.82.
53 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.82–83.
54 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.83.
55 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.83–84.
56 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.84.
57 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.84.
58 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.84–86.
59 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.87.
60 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.93.
61 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.236.
62 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.94.

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1 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.96.
2 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.96.
3 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.96–97.
4 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.99.
5 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.99–100.
6 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.102.
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12 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.106.
13 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.120.
14 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.109.
15 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.110.
16 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.110.
17 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.110.
18 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.113.
19 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.113–114.
20 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.114–115.
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22 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.115.

23 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.115.
24 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.115.
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12 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.127.
13 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, p.128.
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19 Chordia, *Operation Cactus*, pp.133–134.
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Appendix II

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